

Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* - A comparative survey of 18 selected cycles

by Ralph Moore

I do not know how exactly many *Ring* cycles are available but I would guess at least thirty, and I offer the following brief evaluation on the understanding that I make no claims to comprehensiveness; this is a personal survey of the eighteen cycles in my own collection. I candidly admit to having discounted several cycles from the 80's by Haitink (1988-90), Levine (1987-90), Janowski (1980-82), Boulez (1980), as that was decidedly not a Golden Age of Wagner singing, nor have I included the recent, live cycle from Jaap van Zweden on Naxos, as I do not share the enthusiasm some MusicWeb colleagues have expressed for this set as "truly a *Ring* for our age"; I fear that to me that does not sound like a compliment. I have heard, even owned and then discarded them all because I honestly do not think that their casts can hold a candle to the artists in earlier recordings. Nor does their superior stereo or digital sound necessarily present any advantage, in that it only reveals even more distinctly the vocal inadequacies of the singers compared with those of the immediate post-World War II generation. When I want to hear that marvellous music, it is to recordings from the mid-50's and 60's in particular that I turn, because that was the era which gave us stereo sound but could also still stage a Wagner opera with stellar voices, whereas many previous recordings are superbly performed but sonically compromised by being in live mono. Hence the most recent cycle here was recorded a generation ago and all the others are even older, being pre-1980.

There is always the option of assembling a "Dream Ring" by picking and choosing among the hundreds of individual recordings which are not necessarily part of a complete cycle; there are, for example, around twice as many recordings of *Die Walküre*, the most popular, admired and performed of the tetralogy, as there are of the other operas. Thus, for their quality of singing, I always turn first to Erich Leinsdorf's individual 1961 studio recording of *Die Walküre* and even Goodall's *Siegfried* in English in preference to any from complete cycles. However, I appreciate that some punters would like to fix upon one set of the *Ring*, so I have avoided the "pick'n'mix" approach and mostly confined myself to the consideration of proper cycles. I have, however, included what is essentially a compilation *Ring* of Met performances from between 1936 and 1940 (with the option of a Guild "Dream Ring" *Götterdämmerung*, which includes some patching from performances from Covent Garden and the Met), as some unity is conferred upon them by era, location and the presence of the two conductors Bodanzky and Leinsdorf and the two greatest Wagner singers of any age, Lauritz Melchior and Kirsten Flagstad.

The *Ring* does not lend itself to a "period" or "chamber" style, which can sound less like an aesthetically motivated approach and more like an unavoidable compromise imposed by a lack of both the voices able to encompass it and the will to embrace its heroic scale; it requires voices which can dominate – or at least contend with - a huge orchestra composed of newly invented or improved instruments which made a louder, harmonically richer sound than their predecessors, a trend in the manufacture of instruments which has continued and thus increasingly made the singer's job even harder. Fidelity to the composer's intent will involve recognition of the fact that the *Ring* contains moments of quiet intimacy and the quest for authenticity legitimises the recreation and use of the Wagner Tuba, but in general opportunities for down-sizing and domesticating the *Ring* are limited, to the say the least. Orchestras today have never played Wagner better but must increasingly do so beneath a stage devoid of true, Wagnerian voices. The temptation to force has resulted in a melancholy history of Wagner singing littered with casualties; the first Isolde lost her voice after seventy rehearsals of *Tristan und Isolde* and her husband, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, the first Tristan, sang four performances then promptly dropped dead at 29 years old. Kirsten Flagstad's advice to young singer hoping to have a career was, "Leave Wagner alone" and just looking at the role of Siegfried is enough to give the average tenor nodules on his vocal cords. Yet the concealed pit at Bayreuth does aid singers somewhat by baffling the orchestra and Wagner wanted not just volume

but singers trained in the Italian *bel canto* style, with the emphasis upon legato and the ability to sing lyrically as well as declaim; hence there have been successful excursions into his music by essentially Latinate or lyrical singers such as Plácido Domingo and Gundula Janowitz, and acknowledged master Wagner singers with voluminous voices such as Nilsson, Melchior, Schorr and Hotter could sing delicately, too. Studio recording permits some leeway in the casting of voice-types in Wagner, but the greatest singers in the studio-made sets below were equally, if not more, admired on stage and their success was not the product of knob-twiddling.

(Some of the content below is lifted and adapted from my reviews previously posted on MusicWeb.)

The Recordings

“The Potted Ring” 1927-1932 (studio; mono) Pearl

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Friedrich Schorr
 Alberich, Donner – Arthur Fear
 Flosshilde, Fricka– Nellie Walker
 Fricka – Genia Guszalewicz
 Wellgunde – Elsie Suddaby
 Woglinde – Louise Trenton
 Froh, Loge – Waldemar Henke
 Froh – Kennedy McKenna
 Loge – Walter Widdop

Siegfried

Wanderer – Friedrich Schorr/Emil Schipper/
 Rudolf Bockelmann
 Mime – Albert Reiss, Heinrich Tessmer
 Siegfried – Lauritz Melchior
 Alberich, Fafner – Eduard Habich
 Woodbird – Nora Gruhn
 Erda – Maria Olszewska
 Brünnhilde – Florence Easton

Die Walküre

Sieglinde – Göta Ljungberg/ Louise Trenton
 Siegmund – Walter Widdop
 Hundig, Wotan – Howard Fry
 Wotan – Friedrich Schorr
 Brünnhilde – Florence Austral/Frida Leider
 Sieglinde – Göta Ljungberg,
 Valkyrie – Lydia Kindermann
 Valkyrie – Elfriede Marherr, Genia Guszalewicz

Götterdämmerung

First Norn – Gladys Palmer
 Second Norn – Evelyn Arden
 Third Norn – Noel Eadie
 Brünnhilde – Florence Austral
 Siegfried – Walter Widdop/ Rudolf Laubenthal
 Gunther – Arthur Fear/ Desider Zádor
 Hagen – Ivar Andrézen/Emmanuel List/ Frederic
 Collier
 Flosshilde – Elfriede Marherr
 Wellgunde – Lydia Kindermann
 Woglinde – Tilly De Garmo

I cannot recommend this “Potted Ring” as an introduction to the whole cycle; you really need to have already gained some love for, and familiarity with, this stupendous music before embarking on it. You also need to have some tolerance for venerable sound - though I have to say that Mark Obert-Thorn has done such a wonderful clean-up job that one quickly forgets just how long ago these performances were recorded, only briefly after the introduction of electric recording ninety years ago. In any case, one quickly becomes oblivious to the minor sonic limitations when listening to singers of this calibre.

Highlights of these discs are definitely anything involving Melchior or Leider and for great conducting you should start by sampling the excerpts on the first disc from *Götterdämmerung* by Karl Muck and the Berlin State Opera Orchestra. Nonetheless, I thought Blech's account of the "Forest Murmurs" poetic and affecting, and while Rudolf Laubenthal is rather metallic compared with Melchior, he sings with fervour and strength. None of the singers here is surpassed by anyone singing today and many are clearly superior. Ivar Andresen's Hagen is the epitome of saturnine evil; Friedrich Schorr sings with

magisterial authority as Wotan; both Austral and Easton cover themselves in glory as Brünnhilde even if they are not quite Leider's equal, and Widdop displays a heroic tenor which would astound a modern audience were he performing today.

Melchior is hors concours as an artist; he sings with that famous combination of tenderness, virile thrust, clarion top notes, boyish charm, tireless endurance and beauty of tone which is enough to make any aspiring Wagnerian Heldentenor despair; he has it all and very little of the supposed "rhythmic sloppiness" is in evidence. Leider is almost his equal; the only pity is that she does not feature more often in these excerpts - particularly in the Immolation Scene.

A compilation of (mainly) Metropolitan Opera performances:

Das Rheingold

Artur Bodanzky – 1937 (live radio broadcast; mono) Walhall; Naxos; Guild*
Metropolitan Opera Chorus & Orchestra

Wotan - Friedrich Schorr
Fricka - Karin Branzell
Loge - René Maison
Mime - Karl Laufkötter
Alberich - Eduard Habich
Freia - Dorothee Manski
Froh - Hans Clemens
Donner - Julius Huehn
Erda - Doris Doe (*Kerstin Thorborg for Guild)
Fasolt - Norman Cordon
Fafner - Emanuel List
Woglinde - Stella Andrevá
Wellgunde - Irra Petina
Floßhilde - Doris Doe

Siegfried

Artur Bodanzky – 1937 (live radio broadcast; mono) Pristine
Metropolitan Opera Chorus & Orchestra

Siegfried - Lauritz Melchior
Mime - Karl Laufkötter
Wanderer - Friedrich Schorr
Brünnhilde - Kirsten Flagstad
Alberich - Eduard Habich
Erda - Kerstin Thorborg
Fafner - Emanuel List
Waldvogel - Stella Andrevá

Die Walküre

Erich Leinsdorf – 1940 (live radio broadcast; mono/Ambient Stereo*) Pristine*; Walhall; Guild; Arkadia
Metropolitan Opera Chorus & Orchestra

Siegmond - Lauritz Melchior
Sieglinde - Marjorie Lawrence
Hunding - Emanuel List
Brünnhilde - Kirsten Flagstad
Wotan - Julius Huehn
Fricka - Karin Branzell
Gerhilde - Thelma Votipka
Ortlinde - Maxine Stelman
Waltraute - Doris Doe
Schwertleite - Anna Kaskas
Helmwige - Dorothee Manski
Siegfrune - Helen Olheim
Grimgerde - Irra Petina
Roßweiße - Lucielle Browning

Götterdämmerung

Two options:

1) Compilation of various orchestras & conductors – 1936-1951 (mono) Guild
Metropolitan Opera/Covent Garden Chorus & Orchestra

Brünnhilde – Kirsten Flagstad
Siegfried – Lauritz Melchior
Hagen – Deszo Ernster
Alberich – Eduard Habich
Gunther – Herbert Janssen
Gutrune - Hilde Konetzni/Maria Nezádál
Waltraute – Kerstin Thorborg
Woglinde – Erna Berger
Wellgunde – Lucine Amara
Floßhilde – Herts Glaz
First Norn – Doris Doe
Second Norn – Lucielle Browning
Third Norn – Dorothee Manski

2) **Artur Bodanzky – 1936** (live radio broadcast; mono) Naxos
Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra

Brünnhilde - Marjorie Lawrence
Siegfried - Lauritz Melchior
Hagen - Ludwig Hofmann
Alberich - Eduard Habich
Gunther - Friedrich Schorr
Gutrune - Dorothee Manski
Waltraute - Kathryn Meisle
Woglinde - Edita Fleischer
Wellgunde - Irra Petina
Floßhilde - Doris Doe
First Norn - Doris Doe
Second Norn - Irra Petina
Third Norn - Inge Manski

Das Rheingold

As my colleague Bob Farr explains in [his review of the Guild issue](#), Kerstin Thorborg is substituted for the bland Doris Doe as Erda, because she sang that role in Guild's "Dream Ring" *Siegfried*, so the casting becomes both superior and consistent. "Restoration Producer" Richard Caniell also claims to have found better, less muffled but noisier, lacquer transfers than those he used to engineer the Naxos version. There will always be some swish and wavering in pitch which could not be corrected but the Naxos issue remains very listenable for so old a recording and isn't doctored, so will please purists; Naxos also retains the radio commentary.

The orchestra is rather dim and recessed; as is so often the case with vintage recordings, the voices fare better. Many critics I have read, including Richard Caniell, who eulogises him at length in his notes, seem to be far more impressed than I with Eduard Habich's Alberich; to my ears, for all his dramatic skill, his voice is too nasal and light, and he does a lot of barking, but perhaps I am irretrievably spoiled by habituation to Gustav Neidlinger's many incomparable assumptions of the role. Nor do I find Schorr, for all that I acknowledge him to be one of the century's great Wagnerian bass-baritones, to be a patch on George London for power and authority - his top notes in particular are weak, although he contributes a noble *Entry into Valhalla* – and Karin Branzell is rather hooty and hectoring as Fricka. There are obviously some good voices here – Huehn gives us a decent Donner, for example – but, as noted above, Doris Doe's Erda is a bit pale, René Maison bleats as Loge, and Bodanzky's conducting seems rather flaccid in parts here compared with his *Siegfried* the same year; his health was not of the best which is why Leinsdorf sometimes deputised, even for individual Acts within an opera, as per their division of the conducting in *Parsifal* the following year, so that Bodanzky could take a break. This is by no means a poor performance, but given the competition, the casting issues and the trying sound, I cannot say that this is a *Das Rheingold* for the ages. The three subsequent parts of the tetralogy, however, are an entirely different matter...

Die Walküre

This is one of three live broadcasts featuring Lauritz Melchior in *Die Walküre*. Now we have him not only paired with the greatest Brünnhilde of the century in Kirsten Flagstad but in by far the best sound yet, Pristine having re-mastered into Ambient Stereo from a new source of superior 33rpm acetate discs. There is still a little crackle and wear, especially from the beginning of the original sides but the

hiss is minimal and Andrew Rose has artfully patched any gaps where music was missed owing to changeovers. We thus hear sound of extraordinarily fine quality for a recording seventy-five years old, with a superlative cast. This benefits not only from the pairing of the two finest Wagnerians of their generation but a beautiful Wotan from the now almost forgotten American baritone Julius Huehn and a touching, vibrant Sieglinde from Marjorie Lawrence just before the curtailment of her career as a result of her contracting polio the following year; she makes "O hehrstes Wunder" the crucial high point of the opera that it should be.

Huehn in particular is an improvement over the aging Friedrich Schorr, who was in his time the greatest Wotan but was by this stage increasingly having trouble with his top notes. Huehn by contrast is utterly at ease with the tessitura, including a ringing top F, and sings with strength, nobility and subtlety. He may not quite have the vocal weight of other exponents of this demanding role but his Farewell is really moving and delicate; he sounds as fresh in "Leb wohl" as he did two hours earlier. It's a pity that at the climactic closure of Act II, we cannot hear his "Zurück von dem Speer" as he is placed too far back on stage, but no Wotan in my listening experience, apart from Hotter in his prime, voices "Der freier als ich, der Gott" so touchingly and with such quiet despair.

I particularly like Leinsdorf's 1961 studio recording of this opera but he was already master of the score here over twenty years earlier. His conducting, while undoubtedly swift and pacy, is lyrical and energised by turns and of course he indulges his star tenor by sustaining the strings tremolo on Siegmund's repeated "Wälse" to extraordinary lengths while Melchior leans into the crescendos thrillingly. He begins Act I sounding genuinely exhausted then builds and builds throughout the Act with clarion intensity.

Emanuel List is just a little rockier than in his famous recording of Act I in Berlin with Bruno Walter five years earlier but his black bass is still mightily imposing.

Flagstad pins back our ears from her first "Ho-jo-to-ho!"; she is in marvellous voice and peak condition. When the contribution of Karin Branzell as Fricka is added to the mix, we have an unbeatable trio of Wagnerian female voices which would themselves alone be worth hearing even without the presence of Melchior and Huehn.

This is a recording for the ages and every devotee of this wonderful opera should hear Pristine's revitalisation of it.

Siegfried

In his Producer's Note to this issue, Pristine's audio engineer Andrew Rose declares that "[t]he restoration work for this recording has constituted one of the difficult and lengthy of my career, with wild variation in quality in the original source recordings... and severe damage in places". I made immediate comparison with the Naxos re-mastering of the same recording and can confidently endorse his hope that he has succeeded in making this magnificent performance as enjoyable a listening experience as possible; this is the version I will henceforth turn to whenever I want to hear the work performed surely as Wagner intended. From the technical angle, there is far less hiss and crackle, a fuller bass, greater richness, less harshness and real air around the voices without any diminution in frequencies; nor is the orchestra too recessed. Of course, there is still some intermittent swish and flutter, and the surface damage to the original discs sometimes inescapably remains very much in evidence, particularly at the Wanderer's first entry and when Siegfried encounters the fiery rock, but the end-product is so superior to previous incarnations that Andrew Rose must be congratulated on achieving a labour of love for which all echt Wagnerites will be grateful.

The question of cuts in this mammoth work is always a vexed one. The speed of Bodanzky's direction would suggest that cuts have been made throughout, especially in comparison with such as Karajan, let alone Goodall, but there are in fact only two, in the conversations between Siegfried and the Wanderer in Act 3, Scene 2, and between Siegfried and Brünnhilde in Scene 3. I find Bodanzky's propulsion apt and refreshing, lending impetus and excitement to the orchestral accompaniment in what is already a thrillingly sung performance. The Prelude to Act 3, for example, is perfectly executed, with real dash and weight. Besides, Melchior not only easily copes with those speeds, he seems to thrive on them.

Given the sheer length of the role, his is the central performance here. He is appealingly boyish and boisterous, tenderly lyrical and sensitive and magnificently heroic by turns and his "Nothung" is stunning. Surely no Siegfried ever has been, or ever will be, able to encompass the demands of the role so completely and still have the stamina to match the greatest Wagnerian dramatic soprano ever in Act 3. Flagstad is radiant as Brünnhilde, even if I am disappointed that she ducks the final top C traditionally inserted by such as Nilsson, which can put the cap on that extraordinary duet. Similarly, Schorr evinces just a little weakness in snatching at some of his top notes but is otherwise massively authoritative and deeply moving as the Wanderer. Emanuel List is equally impressive as a sinister, black-voiced Fafner and Kerstin Thorborg is predictably steady, stately and majestic as Erda. The Mime is truly sung rather than whined and even the Woodbird, a role too often under-cast, is ideally trilled. I am less content with Habich's Alberich, as he tends to bark and shout, yelling and even faking top notes compared with such as Neidlinger for Solti, the supreme exponent of that role, but that is a minor gripe; he is very characterful and intense.

If you wish to hear this paradigm of a performance in optimal sound, there is no question that the Pristine release is the one to have.

Götterdämmerung

You can choose from the straight, 1936 broadcast conducted by Bodanzky or the "Dream Ring" patchwork compilation recording on Guild.

Naxos historical:

Thief glory here is Melchior but the twenty-six-year-old Marjorie Lawrence – the sporty Australian horsewoman who insisted on riding a real horse into the funeral pyre – has a bright, powerful, voice, not as warm as Flagstad's but incisive and youthful, with a well-developed lower register – and she shows a remarkably mature grasp of both the music and the characterisation. She never fully recovered from the polio so cruelly contracted five years later and which curtailed her career, so we are hearing here at her best. Her voice really rings out above the orchestra and across the ages in the Immolation Scene.

Bodanzky's tempi are sometimes hectic but that generates excitement, such as the conclusion to their opening scene, after the Norns have drearily and needlessly recapped all that has gone before.

There are distinct advantages in Ludwig Hofmann's cavernous, black-voiced Hagen over Deszo Ernster's lumpy singing for Guild and Schorr is very apt as Gunther, if labouring a little up top; the "Vengeance" trio concluding Act 3 shows him, Hofmann and Lawrence all to be in splendid form. Common to Guild and Naxos is Habich's nasty Alberich. The Guttrune here is fine, and the supporting cast adequate, if mostly undistinguished.

I refer you here, too, to my colleague [Jonathan Woolf's review of 2003](#), as I very much concur with his opinion:

"Finally, there is *Götterdämmerung*, another performance which is somewhat compromised by aural imperfection (principally some acetate wear and also a degree of fluctuation on the originals which has been well dealt with here by Ward Marston). This is the earliest of this Met cycle with commensurately the poorest sound but persevere because there are noble compensations. Chief amongst them is, needless to say, Melchior. He is in commanding voice with a brooding, gleaming and sonorous baritone extension. His range is exceptional, his high C of cavalier brilliance, and the impersonation one of all-encompassing variety and breadth. All the more valuable therefore is the fact that this seems to be his only surviving *Götterdämmerung*. Brünnhilde is Marjorie Lawrence and her famous splash in this role was to appear astride her horse Grane as she rides into immolation – a feat Wagner had sanctioned but no one before Lawrence had had the nerve to do. (And a feat to which the director and conductor both objected). Lawrence, then in her mid-twenties possessed a lustrous and youthful sheen to her voice. The voice is strong but not overpowering; the compass is even but distinctly stronger in the middle and upper registers. Hers is an unusually mature understanding of the role, plaint and affectionate where necessary, rising to a peak of complex sensitivity for the Immolation scene. This Bodanzky takes at a pretty fearsome lick, exercising some tempo retardation later on – but his characteristic *vitesse* might be unwelcomingly bracing to some. Schorr's Gunther is still magnetic to hear; when he and Melchior join vocal forces in the blood-brother duet the results are as thrilling as one would anticipate. German bass Ludwig Hofmann made his Met debut in 1932 in this role and he proves a suitably cavernous Hagen, powerful without barking and no guttural impediments. Eduard Habich was fifty-six in 1937 but his insinuating Alberich is still impressive and he abjures easy characterisation. But the principal glory belongs to Melchior, Lawrence his worthy Brünnhilde."

Guild:

This reconstruction of *Götterdämmerung* is a labour of love by Guild's Richard Caniell, who would have every right to be miffed by the couple of absurdly curmudgeonly one-star reviews this set has received on Amazon UK, as it is by any standards and sonic issues notwithstanding, an extraordinary document preserving the two greatest artists ever to sing Siegfried and Brünnhilde. This achievement is all the more praiseworthy when you consider that despite singing these roles together twenty times, no fully listenable and complete recording of a broadcast exists - hence Caniell's exhaustive quest to compile a facsimile of what lucky audiences between 1936 and 1951 might have heard in the theatre.

His sources are essentially five performances between those dates: two conducted by Furtwängler at Covent Garden in 1937 and La Scala in 1950, two by Bodanzky at the Met in 1936 and 1939, and the fifth by Stiedry at the Met in 1951; these five are supplemented by excerpts and even very brief snippets from individual recordings such as Melchior's studio 78's and Furtwängler's "Immolation Scene" with Flagstad in 1948, used for the conclusion of the whole work rather than endure that from 1937, which for the last 48 seconds an "obtrusive, gritty swish". Every effort has been made with this set to give us back a *Götterdämmerung* worthy of the "Dream Ring" which was never recorded and I think it a pity that some reviewers are so churlish as to manufacture moral outrage out of a few niggles. I first listened to the set throughout in high quality Böse headphones and could detect few join problems or blemishes, even when Caniell's needlessly apologetic notes indicted that they were there. Some passages are dimmer and more crackly than others but not so very obtrusively so. In all, Caniell made 177 joins of music from eight different sources and his Herculean task has resulted in something virtually seamless, all things considered.

There are two main issues which are problematic: first, the inferior sonic quality of certain passages in spite of Caniell's best efforts: the beginning of Act III - with three superb Rhine maidens in Berger, Amara and Glaz - is pretty grim but things soon look up from Siegfried's Narrative onwards and we can still clearly hear and marvel at Melchior's sustained top C "Hoiho!". The second gripe is the rather blaring and wobbly Hagen from Dezso Ernster, but he was the only Hagen who sang consistently with

the two stars and we must put up with his imposing but lumpy singing; you may hear how Ludwig Weber, who features only in the Vengeance Trio at the end of Act II where no other recording of sufficient quality was available, would have been preferable but there it is.

Great as Melchior is - and he remains unsurpassed - the crowning glory of this 4 CD set is Flagstad's *Immolation Scene* as mentioned above. Frieda Leider might have been more womanly and suffering earlier in the opera, but Flagstad's grandeur of utterance is breath-taking. The only appropriate response from any true Wagnerite is gratitude.

Rudolf Moralt – 1948-49 (live radio broadcast; mono) Weston-Wesgram
Orchestra - Wiener Symphoniker

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Ferdinand Frantz
Fricka - Elisabeth Höngen
Loge - Julius Pölzer
Mime - William Wernigk
Alberich - Adolf Vogel
Freia - Ilona Steingruber(-Wildgans)
Froh - Willy Friedrich
Donner - Alfred Poell
Erda - Rosette Anday
Fasolt - Marjan Rus
Fafner - Herbert Alsen
Woglinde - Esther Réthy
Wellgunde - Martha Rohs
Floßhilde - Sieglinde Wagner

Siegfried

Siegfried - Günther Treptow
Mime - William Wernigk
Wanderer - Ferdinand Frantz
Brünnhilde - Gertrude Grob-Prandl
Alberich - Adolf Vogel
Erda - Rosette Anday
Fafner - Herbert Alsen
Waldvogel - Ruthilde Boesch

Die Walküre

Siegmond - Günther Treptow
Sieglinde - Hilde Konetzni
Hunding - Herbert Alsen
Brünnhilde - Helena Braun
Wotan - Ferdinand Frantz
Fricka - Rosette Anday
Gerhilde - Judith Hellwig
Ortlinde - Esther Réthy
Waltraute - Rosette Anday
Schwertleite - Alice Ostrowsky
Helmwige - Ilona Steingruber(-Wildgans)
Siegfrune - Gertrud Burgsthaler-Schuster
Grimgerde - Dagmar Hermann
Roßweiße - Else Schürnoff

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Gertrude Grob-Prandl
Siegfried - Günther Treptow
Hagen - Ludwig Weber
Alberich - Adolf Vogel
Gunther - Karl Kamann
Gutrune - Hilde Konetzni
Waltraute - Rosette Anday
Woglinde - Elisabeth Rutgers
Wellgunde - Martha Rohs
Floßhilde - Sieglinde Wagner
First Norn - Rosette Anday
Second Norn - Georgine von Milinkovic
Third Norn - Hilde Konetzni

There is some justification in the criticisms of the slapdash way in which this first, complete, post-World War II *Ring* to be recorded (in concert performances) has been transferred on to 18 CDs but the sound, conducting and singers are all remarkably good and this set can be picked this up very cheaply. It is a valuable representation of some of the finest Wagnerians of the era, singing in an older tradition which values legato, with crystalline diction and a fine sense of drama. The sound is excellent for so old a mono recording, with minimal background hiss and great clarity.

Moralt's conducting is masterly; you have only to listen to the climax of *Die Walküre* to appreciate that he knew exactly how to pace this music: never rushed but always grand and propulsive. Some find Frantz's Wotan to be rather coarse; it is true that he is not as nuanced or subtle as Hotter or Terfel but his is a fine Heldenbariton, more in the George London mode but huskier of tone, with a thrilling ring and admirable stamina - although it helped that this was recorded one Act per night. I do not agree with assertions that Frieda Leider was unquestionably the best Brünnhilde ever or that Helena Braun is necessarily inferior to her; similarly, the largely forgotten Gertrude Grob-Prandl is a formidable Brünnhilde in the last two operas. Günther Treptow was good enough to impress Furtwängler so much that he immediately signed him up for his La Scala *Ring* the following year. All have big, dark, firm Wagner voices and the supporting cast features many a Wagnerian stalwart of that epoch, such as the stentorian and highly versatile Rosette Anday, who sings four roles: Erda, Fricka, Waltraute and First Norn. Hilde Konetzni is a radiant if occasionally slightly acid-toned Sieglinde; virtually unknown singers like black-toned bass Herbert Alsen as Hunding and Fafner and better remembered stars like Ludwig Weber as Hagen are extraordinarily effective and dramatic.

This is not perhaps the set to introduce the novice to Wagner but production issues such as the complete absence of documentation, clumsy fades and mono sound apart, this is a wholly absorbing, wonderfully sung *Ring* in which little disappoints. The big orchestral moments such as the crossing of the rainbow bridge to Valhalla come across vividly even if they cannot compete with the John Culshaw treatment given to Solti's set.

Wilhelm Furtwängler – 1950 (live; mono/Ambient Stereo*) Pristine Audio*

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Ferdinand Frantz
 Fricka - Elisabeth Höngen
 Loge - Joachim Sattler
 Mime - Peter Markwort
 Alberich - Alois Pernerstorfer
 Freia - Walburga Wegner
 Froh - Günther Treptow
 Donner - Angelo Mattiello
 Erda - Margret Weth-Falke
 Fasolt - Ludwig Weber
 Fafner - Albert Emmerich
 Woglinde - Magda Gabory
 Wellgunde - Margareta Kenney
 Floßhilde - Sieglinde Wagner

Siegfried

Siegfried - Set Svanholm
 Mime - Peter Markwort
 Wanderer - Josef Herrmann
 Brünnhilde - Kirsten Flagstad
 Alberich - Alois Pernerstorfer
 Erda - Elisabeth Höngen
 Fafner - Ludwig Weber
 Waldvogel - Julia Moor

Die Walküre

Siegmond - Günther Treptow
 Sieglinde - Hilde Konetzni
 Hunding - Ludwig Weber
 Brünnhilde - Kirsten Flagstad
 Wotan - Ferdinand Frantz
 Fricka - Elisabeth Höngen
 Gerhilde - Walburga Wegner
 Ortlinde - Karen Flagstad (Cerhal)
 Waltraute - Dagmar Schmedes
 Schwertleite - Polly Batic
 Helmwige - Ilona Steingruber(-Wildgans)
 Siegrune - Margareta Kenney
 Grimgerde - Sieglinde Wagner
 Roßweiße - Margret Weth-Falke

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Kirsten Flagstad
 Siegfried - Max Lorenz
 Hagen - Ludwig Weber
 Alberich - Alois Pernerstorfer
 Gunther - Josef Herrmann
 Gutrune - Hilde Konetzni
 Waltraute - Elisabeth Höngen
 Woglinde - Magda Gabory
 Wellgunde - Margareta Kenney
 Floßhilde - Sieglinde Wagner

First Norn - Margret Weth-Falke
 Second Norn - Margareta Kenney
 Third Norn - Hilde Konetzni

Given that we have had so many years to debate the various comparative merits of Furtwängler's two live, Italian Ring cycles, I should first acknowledge that received wisdom opines that this 1950 La Scala Ring is the more incandescent. It is a stage performance rather than a series of concerts, and is, on balance and if only by a narrow margin, better cast but also worse recorded.

This XR re-mastering from Pristine certainly puts paid to that last objection; I soon found myself completely absorbed by the performance and quite forgetful of the sound problems in previous issues which have for many audiophiles rendered a great account almost unlistenable. I know that I first heard it in the 1970s on a set of LPs from the Everest label. The fact that I soon offloaded them speaks for itself. The LP issue from the Murray Hill label is by all accounts no better and both are wildly off-pitch.

Although Andrew Rose cannot compensate for the inevitable tape disintegration in the masters, he has been able to do a great deal of tidying and even reduce the odd percussive cough so we can now hear Furtwängler's special gift of making the music really "sing, seethe or melt" as Deryck Cooke so vividly described it. He is unmatched by any rival conductor in his ability to convey his deep understanding of how Wagner's themes and leitmotifs interrelate and derive from each other. He confers an arcing, architectural, compositional intensity on the whole Ring, reflecting its unity as a true "Gesamtkunstwerk".

However, no amount of fine re-engineering can eliminate one persistent irritation. This is the constant, relentless, pitiless coughing from a La Scala audience who were clearly all heavy smokers and so unacquainted with Wagner as to find the more demanding passages less than absorbing. They are especially bronchial during the orchestral introduction to "Zu neuen Taten". By contrast, the invited RAI audience was angelically placid until the time came for applause. Obviously the La Scala recordings provide a broader, more theatrical acoustic whereas the RAI broadcasts are narrower with voices more forward. That said, comparison with Pristine's own excellent re-mastering of the RAI cycle also reveals that Andrew Rose has been able to uncover a far richer, deeper, more rounded sound for La Scala from a master tape which was evidently recorded at considerably higher volume than the RAI one. You can even hear pages of music being turned in between the hacking. Neither orchestra will ever sound voluptuous but now you can properly hear Furtwängler's intent to shape key phrases beautifully. Try, for example his exquisite moulding of the music which denotes the bond of love between the Volsungs in Act 1 of *Die Walküre*. The climax to that Act is stupendous, despite a bloop from the brass coming in a bar early on "Wälsungen Blut". Similarly, he makes the "Magic Fire Music" dance in just the way Barenboim does not and the conclusion to *Götterdämmerung* becomes the overwhelming, cosmic experience it should be.

I should mention a further consideration for purists: Furtwängler sanctioned two sizeable cuts in the La Scala performances, one in Wotan's second-act monologue in *Die Walküre* and another in the Siegfried-Wanderer confrontation in *Siegfried*. Neither seems to me to be of great importance but those who care about such things should stick with RAI.

In my review of the RAI cycle, regarding Furtwängler's conducting, I write, "In Milan, he is more driven and even at times manic, whereas in Rome the mood is broader and more brooding. His tempi at La Scala are almost as fast as Böhm's at Bayreuth in the 1966-67 Philips recording; here at RAI the tone for the whole cycle is loftier and more deliberate, although never dull." I was also minded to redress in that review what I saw as somewhat unjust criticism of the RAI orchestra. I stand by that verdict but

following my recent listening to this restored La Scala Ring I think it must now clearly be adjudged superior to the RAI, especially as the singers, too, are inspired by the atmosphere of a live performance.

The great bonus of the 1950 Ring is the presence of Flagstad, here 54 years old. She is shorn of a few top notes but still hits all four top Cs in Act 2 of *Die Walküre* and both in the duet which concludes *Siegfried*, even if the second one is only touched on. She takes the optional low A flat in the closing note. By this stage, Set Svanholm, too, is understandably tiring, yelping a few top notes and inevitably playing second fiddle to a fresher Flagstad but that extended, half-hour duet remains thrilling. We are otherwise privileged to hear her only extant complete Brünnhilde sung in sovereign voice. The middle of the voice occasionally curdles into a matronly tone but she is rock-steady and for the most part the top still rings out nobly. Varnay for Krauss and Mödl for Furtwängler in 1953 were both great vocal actresses but for many, despite a certain marmoreal imperturbability, Flagstad's vocal amplitude carries the day.

The other major singer common to both Furtwängler cycles and indeed to the Moralt set, is Ferdinand Frantz as Wotan. He had a big, grand, brazen bass-baritone but is in fresher and more expressive voice in 1950, wholly commanding and riding the orchestra at the end of *Die Walküre* but also softening his tone to bid his beloved daughter farewell.

For some, the tenors in the La Scala Ring jointly constitute a comparative blot on the set. Certainly by modern standards none is less than good and we would be happy to hear any of them. Treptow was a fine Tristan for Knappertsbusch and excellent throughout for Moralt. Here he undertakes an almost too virile Froh and a first-rate Siegmund. His tone can be metallic and his delivery sometimes percussive but he is credibly heroic. Set Svanholm copes manfully with Siegfried and shines in the forging scene. He is never really imposing but nor is he ever an embarrassment. Max Lorenz's Siegfried is decidedly worn, despite his being only 48 at the time. The middle of his voice is hollow and he has largely lost the famous ring although the top notes, even the sustained top C on "Hoiho!" is still - just - there. On balance, Suthaus in 1953 is decidedly better than Lorenz and there isn't that much to choose between Windgassen, Svanholm and Treptow.

For me, despite his fine voice, compared with Frantz, Josef Hermann is not very successful as the Wanderer in *Siegfried*. His neat, lightish baritone is simply miscast; his voice is not the kind to make us believe that it has the heft to summon Erda from the depths. Höngen is a bit unsteady as both Fricka and Erda but she is marvellously acute with the text. Likewise, Ludwig Weber is rocky but imposing in no fewer than four roles: Fasolt, Hunding, the Dragon Fafner and Hagen. Konetzni's bell-like soprano creates a spirited Sieglinde who is no milksop. She is a little careful but touching as Guttrune. The Rhine daughters at La Scala are less starry than those for RAI, missing Jurinac, but still very fine. Both Donners are good but Mattiello has more ring to his tone than Poell. Sattler's experienced Loge has less sap to his voice than Windgassen but he makes a plausibly wily intellectual. All Furtwängler's singers were hand-picked by him, so none is less than good whichever performance you favour, although I still demur at his choice of Wanderer.

Documentation is minimal and no libretto is provided. However, downloads include full scores of each of the operas which can be either viewed on-screen or printed out as desired. There is one technical issue on my copy which is obviously the result of an oversight: at 2:58 in track 16, CD 4 of *Siegfried* there is an editing jump which needs correcting.

Wagnerians everywhere have reason to be grateful to Pristine for resurrecting these justly celebrated performances.

Joseph Keilberth – 1952 (live; mono) Walhall; Zyx; Myto; Archipel
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Hermann Uhde
Fricka - Ira Malaniuk
Loge - Erich Witte
Mime - Paul Kuën
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Freia - Inge Borkh
Froh - Wolfgang Windgassen
Donner - Werner Faulhaber
Erda - Melanie (Mila) Bugarinovic
Fasolt - Ludwig Weber
Fafner - Josef Greindl
Woglinde - Erika Zimmermann
Wellgunde - Hanna Ludwig
Floßhilde - Herta Töpper

Siegfried

Siegfried - Bernd Aldenhoff
Mime - Paul Kuën
Wanderer - Hans Hotter
Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Erda - Melanie (Mila) Bugarinovic
Fafner - Kurt Böhme
Waldvogel - Rita Streich

Die Walküre

Sigmund - Günther Treptow
Sieglinde - Inge Borkh
Hunding - Josef Greindl
Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
Wotan - Hans Hotter
Fricka - Ira Malaniuk
Gerhilde - Irmgard Meinig
Ortlinde - Paula Brivkalne
Waltraute - Hanna Ludwig
Schwertleite - Ruth Siewert
Helmwige - Lieselotte Thomamüller
Siegfrune - Herta Töpper
Grimgerde - Melanie (Mila) Bugarinovic
Roßweiße - Trude Roesler

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
Siegfried - Max Lorenz
Hagen - Josef Greindl
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Gunther - Hermann Uhde
Gutrune - Martha Mödl
Waltraute - Ruth Siewert
Woglinde - Erika Zimmermann
Wellgunde - Hanna Ludwig
Floßhilde - Herta Töpper
First Norn - Ruth Siewert
Second Norn - Melanie (Mila) Bugarinovic
Third Norn - Martha Mödl

Although the casting of the chief roles is not consistent throughout here, there are advantages to this, as you get to hear a variety of singers, some of whom sang their roles only once or twice at Bayreuth. Of course, there are regulars, too, such as Astrid Varnay, one of the very greatest exponents of Brünnhilde, Hans Hotter in his prime totally commanding as Wotan/the Wanderer, so moving, and controlling his big voice wonderfully in his Farewell to Brünnhilde. There are a number of other classic assumptions, too, such as Gustav Neidlinger's justly famous Alberich and the very musical singing of Paul Kuën, the resident and reigning Mime for many a year. Günther Treptow was often under-rated in my estimation and gives us a strong, vibrant Sigmund, even if his tenor has a hard edge and he is occasionally over-enthusiastic to the detriment of line. Inge Borkh makes a febrile Freia and a lovely, positive, clear-voiced, yet haunted, Sieglinde, here in her only year at Bayreuth. Bernd Aldenhoff's vibrato can turn into a slightly irritating bleat under pressure but he has the stamina and volume to undertake Siegfried. Max Lorenz came out of retirement to sing Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung* and is labouring a little, but is he still very convincing. Erich Witte's Loge is unsteady and ungrateful of tone, just as he is for Krauss, but again very experienced and characterful. Resident Bayreuth cavemen Greindl and Weber are much in evidence in the big, growling, Wagnerian bass roles and pleasant little bonuses pop up such as Rita Streich's Woodbird. The biggest surprises to me here are Hermann Uhde's noble, nervy Wotan and vivid Gunther. It is also interesting to hear the excellence of comparatively unknown singers such as contralto Mila Bugarinovic as a mighty Erda. The Rhinedaughters are the best

I've heard anywhere. These were standard company singers in their day; every one would be a star nowadays.

Keilberth is not as exciting a *Ring* conductor as Krauss but his tempi are swift and he brings out detail, sustaining an overview so proceedings never feel bitty or drag.

The sound is decent without distortion, although the voices are a bit distant – for instance, Aldenhoff's sturdy Siegfried and Hotter's majestic Wanderer are barely inaudible in some entrances. If you are tolerant of mono and desirous of hearing a medley of superlative Bayreuth singers from the post-war Golden Age, you should buy this terrific bargain – but it can't be a first choice for reasons of the sound.

Joseph Keilberth – 1953 (live; mono) Walhall; Zyx
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Hans Hotter
Fricka - Ira Malaniuk
Loge - Erich Witte
Mime - Paul Kuën
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Freia - Bruni Falcon
Froh - Gerhard Stolze
Donner - Hermann Uhde
Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
Fasolt - Ludwig Weber
Fafner - Josef Greindl
Woglinde - Erika Zimmermann
Wellgunde - Hetty Plümacher
Floßhilde - Gisela Litz

Siegfried

Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
Mime - Paul Kuën
Wanderer - Hans Hotter
Brünnhilde - Martha Mödl
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
Fafner - Josef Greindl
Waldvogel - Rita Streich

Die Walküre

Siegmond - Ramón Vinay
Sieglinde - Regina Resnik
Hunding - Josef Greindl
Brünnhilde - Martha Mödl
Wotan - Hans Hotter
Fricka - Ira Malaniuk
Gerhilde - Brünnhilde Friedland
Ortlinde - Bruni Falcon
Waltraute - Lise Sorrell
Schwertleite - Maria von Ilosvay
Helmwige - Lieselotte Thomamüller
Siegfrune - Gisela Litz
Grimgerde - Sibylla Plate
Roßweiße - Erika Schubert

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Martha Mödl
Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
Hagen - Josef Greindl
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Gunther - Hermann Uhde
Gutrune - Natalie Hinsch-Gröndahl
Waltraute - Ira Malaniuk
Woglinde - Erika Zimmermann
Wellgunde - Hetty Plümacher
Floßhilde - Gisela Litz
First Norn - Maria von Ilosvay
Second Norn - Ira Malaniuk
Third Norn - Regina Resnik

I am a sucker for bargain recordings of Wagner's *Ring* and have several on my shelves that would serve as a fair introduction to the novice even if ideally a top-quality recording in best stereo sound with a libretto, synopsis and notes is preferable. This one, in lurid primary colours on twelve CDs in cardboard sleeves with nothing other than track listings, a cast list and a one-paragraph mini-biography of conductor Joseph Keilberth on the back of the box, certainly doesn't meet my first or second criterion – but the cast is arguably one of the finest, if not the finest, on record. It's not perfect: Windgassen gets himself in a pickle several times as he did in *Siegfried* under Clemens Krauss a month later, but

another chance to hear a complete *Ring* with Hans Hotter in his prime, this time singing with the Brünnhilde of Martha Mödl rather than Astrid Varnay, is irresistible to the dedicated Wagnerite. Apart from the change of conductor and Brünnhilde, the casts in July and August 1953 were identical. Andrew Rose at Pristine Audio did a splendid job in refurbishing the Krauss *Ring* into Ambient Stereo – but you certainly cannot acquire that set for a tenner, as you can this Documents set. The mono sound here is wholly unobjectionable and actually very good, if occasionally a tad over-reverberant; I find it best suited to listening on good quality headphones - although that does tend to amplify the audibility of the prompter. The clattering hammers of the toiling Nibelungen, for example, which open and close CDs 1 and 2 respectively, come over quite vividly and the balance between voices and orchestra is, as usual from Bayreuth, ideal; both are clear and detailed. Even the insensitive audience coughing is admirably distinct – and it is particularly fearsome during the lowering, glowering Prelude to Act 2 of *Siegfried* and there are times during this cycle when if I had been a singer, I would have done a Jon Vickers: “Shut up with your damn coughing.”

Inevitably, given the uniformity of casting, much of what I had to say in my reviews of the Krauss *Ring* below applies to this one; the main differences obviously lie in the conducting and the relative merits of Varnay's and Mödl's Brünnhildes. Keilberth is steadier and weightier than Krauss' more febrile, stop-go approach and at times comparatively a bit dull, but I quibble. His timings are in fact overall similar to Krauss' in the first three evenings, though he is rather more leisurely in *Götterdämmerung*.

In *Das Rheingold*, Hotter is splendid throughout even if no-one ever thrills me the way George London does in the Solti recording when he summons his fellow-gods to cross the rainbow bridge into Valhalla. I still find Erich Witte's Loge elderly sounding – although was only in his early forties – and a bit of a trial, but the rest of the cast is great; the quality of the Rhinedaughters' singing immediately makes the listener sit up – but I do wish someone had said to them, “Enough with the forced, phony laughing already!” Paul Kuën gives us a vivid, neatly sing Mime and Gustav Neidlinger's Alberich is already a tour de force. There is some exquisite orchestral playing here, too; sampling the instrumental passage beginning around 3'50" in track 7 on CD2 we might remember that this was the year following Karajan's magnificently sung and played *Tristan und Isolde* – the orchestra was already a world-class ensemble. (Unfortunately, in the same track around the same time, an electronic buzzing increasingly intrudes and persists for a couple of minutes until the end of the track – but that is an isolated incident.) Hermann Uhde makes his mark in the cameo role of Donner with its one big moment when he wields his hammer. Maria von Ilosvay is steady, imposing and hieratic as the Ur-Earth-Mother, Erda. Goodness knows how she manages to forget herself so thoroughly as to permit Wotan to sire with her no fewer than nine progeny between the close of *Das Rheingold* and start of *Die Walküre*...but I digress...

Indeed, the first Act of *Die Walküre* delivers everything you could desire from that greatest passage in the entire *Ring*: pounding tension, beautiful singing from three great voices and rapturous string playing. Keilberth gives Vinay and Resnik ample time to fill their grateful phrases with ample tone but generates fist-pumping, air-punching excitement at its climax. This is just where Krauss fails and presides over the one weak spot in his direction of the work.

We hear Mödl's Brünnhilde for the first time at the opening of Act 2; she has a powerful voice with a strangely grainy, throaty timbre and a catch in it that makes it very individual and instantly recognisable. Hotter and Malaniuk make a fine, warring couple, their vivid word-painting adding real edge to their argument. There is no denying that for some Act 2 has its longueurs, but with the six voices here you will not hear it performed better, with the possible of Leinsdorf's magnificent 1961 studio recording. The last Act is a triumph, the occasional sour tuning in the woodwind notwithstanding. Mödl is intensely moving in her plea for a more dignified punishment and Wotan's “Leb' wohl, du kühnes, herrliches Kind” gives me goose bumps; the combination of trembling emotion

and vocal strength in Hotter's voice is irresistible. I could wish for the "Magic Fire Music" to be played at more of a trot, but it has massive dignity and sonority.

Siegfried invariably presents the greatest challenge in any cycle and Windgassen's first stab at the eponymous title role is not without its accidents and he gets completely lost for a while in "Zu neuen Taten" in *Götterdämmerung* but it's a brave assumption by a singer who was never really the complete Heldentenor but husbanded then selectively applied his vocal resources very intelligently. His tone whines and he sometimes resorts to a guttural sound for emphasis but manages the Forging Scene without fading or ducking notes, even if he is rhythmically uncertain. It's a pity there's a break in that scene between CDs 6 and 7, which breaks the flow, but it's not in the worst of places. Hotter is in especially mighty voice in "Wache, Wala! Wala! Erwach!" at the start of Act 3 and in the ensuing tortured outburst in conversation with Erda; this is the legendary Wagnerian, not the faded wobbler of later years who recorded his Wotan for Solti in the 60's. I find Mödl mesmerising in the last great, extended duet; she shirks nothing and wallops the last top C, while Windgassen rises to the occasion and keeps up with her. If you have just sat through nearly four hours of *Siegfried*, those ten minutes have to deliver, and, my goodness, they do here.

Paul Kuën continues to portray Mime with exemplary diction and depicts his character memorably while avoiding the whining caricature we too often hear. Neidlinger and Ilosvay are once again ideal in their roles and Rita Streich makes an attractive Woodbird, trilling neatly and charmingly.

Joseph Greindl underpins the whole cycle with his assumption of three bass roles of Fafner, Hunding and Hagen; he is sometimes a little clumsy and even rocky, but what a big, black, menacing noise he makes – ideal for portraying all three brutes. It's a pity that in his final death-scene he is placed so far back from the microphone.

Götterdämmerung is even longer than its predecessor but is more varied in content, and if vocal quality helps it slip by, then Keilberth's *Ring* has every advantage. Canny deployment of already available personnel means that we have three Norns of extraordinary pedigree: the singers who impersonate Erda, Fricka and Sieglinde transform themselves into the three Weird Sisters. Once Windgassen has got his mistake over and done with, his opening duet with Mödl is as thrilling as was the closing one in *Siegfried*, providing a sense of dramatic continuity. "Siegfried's Rhine Journey" is so energised that sometimes the audience even stop coughing long enough to listen to several uninterrupted bars but as soon as Gunther and Hagen appear, its tuberculosis as usual. One wonders how the Guttrune slipped past quality control to get a job in such distinguished company, as she is as much of a blot on Keilberth's *Götterdämmerung* as she was on Krauss' the following month, but we must live with it. It's a pleasure to hear Hermann Uhde as Gunther, even if he sounds rather too virile for that craven personage. The crucial oath-swearing trio concluding Act 2, is scintillating.

The final Act is splendid; Mödl proves to be quite the equal of any other Brünnhilde, attacking her top Bs and B flats fearlessly and Keilberth drives his orchestra to a wholly satisfying apotheosis.

Of course, you can hear Keilberth's Bayreuth *Ring* from 1955 in live composite recordings in stereo on the Testament label, but again, you will pay a great deal more for that privilege than you will for this box – and the casts are very similar without necessarily being noticeably superior; Hotter, for example is just beginning to develop a bit of a wobble in 1955 which wasn't there two years earlier. Some also find the amount of stage noise from feet and hissing machinery objectionably intrusive.

All in all, this is much more than an historical document and it would be extraordinarily churlish not to welcome, praise and prize a *Ring* of this quality and provenance so competitively priced.

Clemens Krauss – 1953 (live; mono/Ambient Stereo) Opera d'Oro; Pristine Audio*
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Hans Hotter
Fricka - Ira Malaniuk
Loge - Erich Witte
Mime - Paul Kuën
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Freia - Bruni Falcon
Froh - Gerhard Stolze
Donner - Hermann Uhde
Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
Fasolt - Ludwig Weber
Fafner - Josef Greindl
Woglinde - Erika Zimmermann
Wellgunde - Hetty Plümacher
Floßhilde - Gisela Litz

Siegfried

Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
Mime - Paul Kuën
Wanderer - Hans Hotter
Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
Fafner - Josef Greindl
Waldvogel - Rita Streich

Die Walküre

Sigmund - Ramón Vinay
Sieglinde - Regina Resnik
Hunding - Josef Greindl
Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
Wotan - Hans Hotter
Fricka - Ira Malaniuk
Gerhilde - Brünnhilde Friedland
Ortlinde - Bruni Falcon
Waltraute - Lise Sorrell
Schwertleite - Maria von Ilosvay
Helmwige - Lieselotte Thomamüller
Siegfrune - Gisela Litz
Grimgerde - Sibylla Plate
Roßweiße - Erika Schubert

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
Hagen - Josef Greindl
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Gunther - Hermann Uhde
Gutrune - Natalie Hinsch-Gröndahl
Waltraute - Ira Malaniuk
Woglinde - Erika Zimmermann
Wellgunde - Hetty Plümacher
Floßhilde - Gisela Litz
First Norn - Maria von Ilosvay
Second Norn - Ira Malaniuk
Third Norn - Regina Resnik

First the obvious advantages of the "Opera d'Oro" package: unbelievably good value (especially if you buy it through Amazon Marketplace); very attractive artwork; nice photos, an informative essay by Robert Levine and neat synopses by Bill Parker (the regular "Opera d'Oro" contributor) - all in clean, if limited, mono sound which, if I'm not mistaken, actually improves after a slightly fizzy start to *Das Rheingold* and seems particularly immediate by the time we arrive at *Siegfried*.

Then there are the performances themselves. I don't see any need to make invidious comparisons with the other landmark *Ring*: Solti's studio set. Both have their many merits and some of the artists are common to both sets, though clearly appreciably fresher in 1953. Hotter is the most obvious beneficiary from being recorded earlier in his career, before his sound became too hollow and "woofy"; these discs really permit the listener to appreciate the massive authority he brought to his Wotan/Wanderer - he is in cavernous voice, though there are still occasional signs of the later problems. Windgassen, too, in his first essay as Siegfried, is younger and sappier than for Solti, though I still think that nobody, apart, perhaps, from Remedios, has approached Melchior's ideal assumption of that volatile young hero. Neidlinger is incomparably vivid and malicious as Alberich - but he was to be equally superb for Solti in 1958.

For the Wagner neophyte, I see this set primarily as a wonderful supplement to a studio recording, as then you will already know what details to listen out for and the *Ring* really deserves to be heard in good sound. Once you've heard John Culshaw's handling of Nibelheim and the "Entry into Valhalla" in Solti's *Das Rheingold*, any other recording is likely to be an anti-climax - but that is not to denigrate the quality of this "Opera d'Oro" re-mastering.

Varnay proves herself almost the vocal equal of Nilsson as Brünnhilde and often exceeds her in drama and depth of characterisation; Resnik turns in a splendidly vocalised, deeply felt, Sieglinde (but is, for some reason inexplicable to me, often identified as the "weakest link" in the *Die Walküre*). Greindl is both touching and menacing as Fafner (and Hunding and Hagen!) - one could go on and on detailing the mastery of so many performances here; suffice it to say that no Wagnerite can afford to miss (especially at this absurdly affordable price) probably the greatest *Ring* ever performed and recorded - with the possible exception of the 1927-32 "Potted Ring Cycle" on Pearl, which is really only excerpts and is more specialised and less accessible to the general enthusiast by virtue of its age.

The sound isn't too bad on this issue and those who first seek mighty Wagnerian voices might to some degree be blinded by the vocal quality of the stellar cast assembled here and prepared to forgive those moments, such as when Donner gathers the mists about him and strikes the rock with his hammer; the big obstacle to advocacy of this 1953 live recording was always the dim, recessed sound of the orchestra.

However, there is another option for those who have always balked at the elevation of this set: the remastering by Pristine Audio is a revelation - a big improvement on these Allegro/Opera d'Oro discs and well worth acquiring to hear a great *Ring* in cleaner, fuller sound. It goes a long way towards countering those objections and will for many permit this famous cycle to take its place at the head of a long line, even if it is mono and can never rival the "Sonicstage" splendours of John Culshaw's Decca set. Pristine's sound engineer Andrew Rose understandably hesitated to undertake the task given that Opera d'Oro/Allegro had already issued a beautifully packaged bargain box-set of the whole thing - but this new incarnation leaves it in the dust, sonically speaking. By comparison, the Opera d'Oro sound is cavernous and bleary; Pristine have given it much more warmth, presence and definition. The blare has been reduced and the all-important orchestral detail now emerges more clearly. This improved sound has the effect of making the orchestra seem to play better; on previous issues it could sound more like a high school band than the same orchestra which the year before had been led to the heights in Wieland Wagner's new *Tristan und Isolde* under Karajan. There are still moments when ensemble goes to pot - the "Ride of the Valkyries" is not its finest hour - but we must remember that this is a live performance, with its pitfalls and imperfections. It is also worth pointing out that it is not fair to judge the sound quality of the whole cycle by *Das Rheingold*; although it's perfectly listenable. I am sure that by the second night the Decca sound engineers had worked out better microphone placement and made the appropriate adjustments to equipment sound-levels based on the experience of the first night's recording; there is a noticeable improvement in the sound of *Die Walküre* onwards.

Apart from its inherent virtues, the legendary status of this production was enhanced by the fact that its conductor, Clemens Krauss, was dead within nine months. Krauss is today widely reviled for the fact that he is perceived as one of the worst "Nazi collaborator" conductors - yet he and his wife, the celebrated soprano Viorica Ursuleac in fact collaborated with the Cook sisters to smuggle Jews to safety in England. Leaving that aside, Krauss was clearly a skilled Wagner practitioner who favoured a fleet, forward-moving pulse but also knew how to give his singers space and to achieve the required stillness in the more reflective moments of the drama. My one serious disappointment lies in Krauss's failure to generate enough excitement at the end of Act 1 of *Die Walküre* when the explosive passion of the incestuous twins is uncovered. He is rhythmically too slack here and cannot emulate the

inexorable drive of Bruno Walter in 1935 or Leinsdorf in his neglected 1961 recording, but elsewhere, in general, Krauss sustains tension admirably.

The cast is extraordinary; all the more so in an age bereft of Wagner singers. Vinay's effortful Siegmund, for all his musicality and burnished tone, cannot be considered the equal of Walter's Melchior but he is a fine actor and has all the notes. Windgassen's first essay as Siegfried is compromised by his intermittently bleating tone, some pardonable slips and a characteristic, infuriating anticipation of the beat in the forging scene. He is no-one's youthful ideal as Siegfried, but where is his like today? I admire Regina Resnik's impassioned Sieglinde although it has generally been considered a weakness. Astrid Varnay, while not having the laser intensity of Nilsson, exhibits extraordinary vocal commitment and stamina as Brünnhilde, some scooping apart. Josef Greindl assumes three pivotal bass roles as Fafner, Hunding and Hagen, and is far steadier than was sometimes the case; a proper German "black" bass to chill the marrow. But for me, and for all the virtues of the other singers, the two stars of this cycle are Gustav Neidlinger and Hans Hotter.

Neidlinger's Alberich is a fully-formed assumption: malevolence and despair incarnate, incredibly steady and incisive. He makes a formidable adversary to Hotter's Wotan.

The improved sound allows us to hear the slight wheeze in Hotter's singing no doubt attributable to his chronic hay fever, but for the most part the sonority of his bass is awe-inspiring. I admit that I never "got" Hotter before listening to this set but my impressions were gained from hearing him recorded too late in the Solti cycle, when his tone had loosened and become "woofy". Here his authority and commanding vocalisation really do conjure up a god - yet conversely he is humanity and tenderness incarnate in "Der Augen leuchtendes Paar"; he inflects the text with the heart-breaking intensity of a seasoned Lieder-singer.

Other famous names from the 1950s feature in even relatively minor supporting roles. This consistency and strength of casting in combination with Krauss's alert direction have always endeared this Ring to Wagnerians but this remastering by Pristine will be instrumental in encouraging a new generation of Ring aficionados previously deterred by the primitive sound to become acquainted with a great Bayreuth monument. It will not replace Solti or Karajan for beauty of sound, but it is now the front-runner as a supplement.

The final instalment, *Götterdämmerung*, in many ways represents a fitting climax to a superb achievement by Andrew Rose; it surpasses even his previous achievement: the singing, the orchestral playing and the immediacy and clarity of the sound are all markedly superior, such that I really could forget that it is in mono and temporarily luxuriate in the fantasy that this live *Götterdämmerung* marks the culmination of what is for many the best *Ring* on the market, alongside Keilberth's stereo cycle on Testament.

A few things bring me back to earth: a few flubs and imprecisions in orchestral ensemble, the nagging conviction that Windgassen's rather dry tone and a tendency to bleat and bark are hardly ideal for the barely post-adolescent Siegfried and a tremulous, gusty, hooty Gutfrune who is possibly the least satisfactory on record - but so much else is captivating that it is not too difficult to overlook those shortcomings.

At least Windgassen seems to have overcome the first night nerves which in *Siegfried* caused him regularly to sing ahead of the beat and make so many errors; here he seems far more confident and secure. Perhaps Varnay's rock-steady musicality reassured and inspired him, as they make a most impressive team, especially in the ecstatic duet in the Prologue. Varnay, a little trademark scooping and the occasional, forgivable squalliness notwithstanding, is also just terrific in the "Starke Scheite",

whacking out top Bs and B-flats with absolute security and standing comparison with the greatest exponents of Brünnhilde such as Frida Leider and Birgit Nilsson. She is also a thrilling actress whose words are generally pellucid, and she rides the orchestra easily - all the more important now that the remastering has given the latter more prominence.

The supporting singers, Hirsch-Gröndahl's Guttrune apart, are of the highest calibre, headed by Greindl's star-turn as Bayreuth's resident cave-man, his big, black, burly sound perfect for conveying Hagen's bestial cunning and brutality. As is often the case with this artist, he is not always ideally steady, but he lives the part very convincingly. Equally impressive is Uhde's incomparable Gunther: nervy, febrile and beautifully vocalised; alongside it, Fischer-Dieskau's characterisation for Solti can seem pale and small-scale. The trio at the end of Act 2 in which Brünnhilde, Gunther and Hagen swear vengeance on Siegfried is always a key point for me and all three singers rise magnificently to its challenges. Nor does Krauss fail here, as he very occasionally does in *Die Walküre*, to generate the requisite tension; indeed, I think his pacing of this whole massive work is swift, sweeping and masterly. The Norns are suitably grave and weighty of voice and the other female trio, the Rhinemaidens ("a sort of aquatic Beverley Sisters", to quote Anna Russell), are a delightful team; sweet and ethereal, maintaining lovely intonation in their tripartite harmonies in thirds. The rich-voiced contralto Ira Malaniuk reminds us what a fine singer she was in her big scene as an alternately grave and frantic Waltraute. Similarly, Neidlinger reasserts his claim in a cameo appearance as the finest Alberich of his generation, in a typically incisive vignette in his nocturnal visit to his son, Hagen.

In previous evenings, Krauss was inclined to hurry proceedings along and sometimes ensemble was less than precise, but here there is a gratifyingly large-scale sense of control, vision and pacing; take for example the segue from Waltraute's departure to the appearance of Siegfried disguised by the Tarnhelm as Gunther. Krauss seems to me to manage the sequence of all Brünnhilde's emotions, through defiance, determination, exultation, and shocked disbelief; the orchestral coloration is both subtle and skilful, much more like the performance for Karajan the preceding year in *Tristan*.

The re-mastering has permitted an astonishing range of frequencies to emerge; orchestral details and a sense of theatrical space are now so much more in evidence. The enhanced aural scope reveals the fact that the audience were mostly remarkably quiet and it would be a churl who complained about the newly audible hiss of the flames engulfing the funeral pyre.

Wilhelm Furtwängler – 1953 (live radio broadcast; mono/Ambient Stereo*) Pristine Audio
Orchestra - RAI Roma

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Ferdinand Frantz
Fricka - Ira Malaniuk
Loge - Wolfgang Windgassen
Mime - Julius Patzak
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Freia - Elisabeth Grümmer
Froh - Lorenz Fehenberger
Donner - Alfred Poell
Erda - Ruth Siewert
Fasolt - Josef Greindl
Fafner - Gottlob Frick
Woglinde - Sena Jurinac
Wellgunde - Magda Gabory
Floßhilde - Hilde Rössl-Majdan

Die Walküre

Siegmond - Wolfgang Windgassen
Sieglinde - Hilde Konetzni
Hunding - Gottlob Frick
Brünnhilde - Martha Mödl
Wotan - Ferdinand Frantz
Fricka - Elsa Cavelti
Gerhilde - Gerda Scheyrer
Ortlinde - Magda Gabory
Waltraute - Dagmar Schmedes
Schwertleite - Hilde Rössl-Majdan
Helmwige - Judith Hellwig
Siegrune - Olga Bennings
Grimgerde - Elsa Cavelti
Roßweiße - Ira Malaniuk

Siegfried

Siegfried - Ludwig Suthaus
 Mime - Julius Patzak
 Wanderer - Ferdinand Frantz
 Brünnhilde - Martha Mödl
 Alberich - Alois Pernerstorfer
 Erda - Margarete Klose
 Fafner - Josef Greindl
 Waldvogel - Rita Streich

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Martha Mödl
 Siegfried - Ludwig Suthaus
 Hagen - Josef Greindl
 Alberich - Alois Pernerstorfer
 Gunther - Alfred Poell
 Gutrune - Sena Jurinac
 Waltraute - Margarete Klose
 Woglinde - Sena Jurinac
 Wellgunde - Magda Gabory
 Floßhilde - Hilde Rössl-Majdan
 First Norn - Margarete Klose
 Second Norn - Hilde Rössl-Majdan
 Third Norn - Sena Jurinac

This cycle begs comparison above all with Furtwängler's famous and incandescent recording of the La Scala *Ring* three years earlier in 1950, yet despite the fact that both live recordings equally bear the hallmark of his genius as a Wagner interpreter, they are conducted quite differently. In Milan, he is more driven and even at times manic, whereas in Rome the mood is broader and more brooding. His tempi at La Scala are almost as fast as Böhm's at Bayreuth in the 1966-67 Philips recording; here at RAI the tone for the whole cycle is loftier and more deliberate, although never dull. Furthermore, the Rome performances are played without cuts, unlike those at La Scala.

You will read elsewhere in numerous reviews a great deal of exaggerated criticism of the RAI orchestra, including some excessively harsh ridicule of their brass section. There are indeed a few bobbles and bloopers but nothing absurd, given that they were new to the music and clearly playing it with relish. The worst of the playing and of the sound is in the first opera of the tetralogy, *Das Rheingold*, where there is a fair number of raucous, ill-tuned moments from both the brass and the woodwind. By *Die Walküre* they seem to be in the groove and Furtwängler is very evidently getting what he wants in key orchestral passages such as the climax to the lovers' duet in the Prologue of *Götterdämmerung*. Most of the time I am hardly aware of the supposed inadequacies of the RAI, nor is the Bayreuth orchestra for Krauss always beyond reproach or necessarily any better. I do not, it is true, hear in the sublime closing pages of *Die Walküre* the sheen on the strings we get from the Vienna Philharmonic with Solti or the LSO for Leinsdorf, but nor is the RAI's playing a debacle.

It is interesting also to compare the two live *Rings* made so close to each other in the same year of 1953; Krauss at Bayreuth is more urgent and impulsive, whereas Furtwängler has an extraordinary over-arching sense of pacing, never rushed but always purposeful – yet he can produce the pyrotechnics, as in Siegfried's Rhine Journey. In *Die Walküre*, Kraus has the edge over Furtwängler's singers with the virile, baritone Vinay as Siegmund; Windgassen remains too pale of voice to provide heft or thrills, nor do I find him very characterful in his other role as Loge, for all that he sings musically. On the other hand, Suthaus as Siegfried is a match for Vinay. Some will decidedly prefer Hotter's Wotan to that of the more generalised Ferdinand Frantz, although the latter is utterly dependable. Konetzni's Sieglinde is a bit laboured and she scoops; Resnik for Krauss, Rysanek for Klobucar and Brouwenstijn for Leinsdorf are all much more impassioned. On balance, therefore, with the exception of Windgassen, the singers in the Rome set are either literally the same or superior, Flagstad notwithstanding. Vickers and Nilsson provide the most electricity for Leinsdorf in the 1961 stereo recording and in the newly released Met broadcast on Sony, but the sound in the latter is mono and the conductor Klobucar tame and pedestrian compared with the three other conductors mentioned above. Furtwängler, in particular, has an extraordinarily architectural sense of shape and brings an

intensity to his phrasing unmatched by any rival. Wagner's eighth and sixteenth notes dance bewitchingly without any smudging or rushing, yet often his tempi are either the same or only marginally slower than those of the others. He has a particular gift for creating atmosphere; thus Fafner's baleful presence sits brooding on the opening of *Siegfried* and an impalpable but haunting air of mystery pervades the first scene of *Götterdämmerung*. He encompasses the whole gamut of moods and emotions demanded by Wagner, from the tender wistfulness of Siegfried's musing and reminiscing in the forest to the grand, cosmic utterance of his Funeral March. He even seems comfortable with the comic moments, bringing a light touch to Siegfried's bickering with Mime. His 1954 studio recording, although impressive, seems a little flat and studied in comparison.

The sound of this latest Pristine issue is now comparable to, if not better than, the Krauss Ring; but as both complete cycles are now available on that label you can own and compare them yourself in by far their finest incarnations to date. I am beginning to take the excellence of Andrew Rose's XR re-mastering for granted, so thorough, painstaking and well-judged is his treatment of the EMI LPs, derived from the original broadcast tapes and first issued in 1972. Deryck Cooke famously declared that issue as "the greatest gramophone event of the century" – I wonder what he would have said if he had heard it in sound as good as Pristine gives us here. Obviously the La Scala recording has a much broader, theatrical acoustic whereas the Rome concert is narrower and more confined with voices more focused. That said, the later recording always was superior on account of the circumstances under which it was recorded and broadcast; this reincarnation by Andrew Rose makes it even more attractive despite the absence of Flagstad. For doubters or the merely curious, Pristine provides on their website aural snippets for purposes of comparison from the EMI 1972 issue on LPs, their 1990 CD re-mastering (reissued unchanged this year), the Gebhardt set from 2005 and an extended clip from Pristine's own re-mastering; they speak for themselves and the latter is clearly far superior.

In any case, Martha Mödl is by no means a poor substitute for Flagstad. True, Mödl's tone is never very beautiful and sometimes even sounds a bit curdled compared with Varnay and Nilsson. She ducks some high notes elsewhere and only just manages the high C at the end of the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*. Nonetheless, the heft of her lower register is compelling and her singing is always intense and memorable; her very human vulnerability is in many ways preferable to Flagstad's marmoreal grandeur. Ferdinand Frantz is the Wotan in both sets and to my ears is superb in both. He has a really sonorous Heldenbariton and even if he isn't as nuanced, he sings subtly and is less susceptible to bark and wobble than Hotter, who is more evidently an actor-singer with a Liedersinger's care over words-painting and variety of expression. Both Frick (Fafner and Hunding) and Greindl (Fasolt and Hagen) are both Big Beasts, suitably dour and daunting. As Siegfried, Suthaus' tenor has a heroic, baritonal ring similar to that of Vinay and, like him, also the stamina – no doubt greatly helped by the fact that apart from *Das Rheingold* which was performed complete in one sitting, the performance and recording of the cycle were spread over several nights, one Act per evening. Poell is superb as Donner and Gunther. Another stand-out voice in three roles is Sena Jurinac, soaring above the ensembles. Klose is marvellously portentous as Erda and the First Norn, and tragically eloquent, if a tad unsteady, as Waltraute. The experienced Alois Pernerstorfer and Gustav Neidlinger both excel as Alberich although the latter has the more biting voice. Smaller roles are cast from strength: a charming Woodbird from Rita Streich, a febrile Freia from Elisabeth Grümmer and a mellifluous Froh from Fehenberger.

A sticking point for some, however, is Julius Patzak's restrained, neatly sung Mime – a far cry from the usual cackling psychopath. It is certainly interesting to hear Wagner's music for Mime sung so sweetly and precisely. His characterisation of Mime as a calculating introvert is not necessarily inappropriate – although I still prefer a more conventional dwarf who wheedles and whines.

Documentation is minimal and no libretto is provided. However, downloads include full scores of each of the operas which can be either viewed on-screen or printed out as desired.

One can forgive sound engineer Andrew Rose for paraphrasing Furtwängler's words spoken to his wife on the way home from having completed the entire cycle with the Third Act of *Götterdämmerung* (speaking of Wagner): "I think he would have been satisfied with me". I am certainly highly satisfied with both Furtwängler's performance and Rose's transfers. This remastered set is indispensable to Wagnerites everywhere.

Joseph Keilberth – 1955 (live composite; stereo) Testament

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Hans Hotter
 Fricka - Georgine von Milinkovic
 Loge - Rudolf Lustig
 Mime - Paul Kuën
 Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
 Freia - Hertha Wilfert
 Froh - Josef Traxel
 Donner - Toni Blankenheim
 Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
 Fasolt - Ludwig Weber
 Fafner - Josef Greindl
 Woglinde - Jutta Vulpius
 Wellgunde - Elisabeth Schärtel
 Floßhilde - Maria Graf

Siegfried

Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
 Mime - Paul Kuën
 Wanderer - Hans Hotter
 Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
 Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
 Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
 Fafner - Josef Greindl
 Waldvogel - Ilse Hollweg

Die Walküre

Siegmund - Ramón Vinay
 Sieglinde - Gré Brouwenstijn
 Hunding - Josef Greindl
 Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
 Wotan - Hans Hotter
 Fricka - Georgine von Milinkovic
 Gerhilde - Hertha Wilfert
 Ortlinde - Gerda Lammers
 Waltraute - Elisabeth Schärtel
 Schwertleite - Maria von Ilosvay
 Helmwige - Hilde Scheppan
 Siegrune - Jean Watson
 Grimgerde - Georgine von Milinkovic
 Roßweiße - Maria Graf

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
 Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
 Hagen – Josef Greindl
 Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
 Gunther - Hermann Uhde
 Gutrune - Gré Brouwenstijn
 Waltraute - Maria von Ilosvay
 Woglinde - Jutta Vulpius
 Wellgunde - Elisabeth Schärtel
 Floßhilde - Maria Graf
 First Norn - Maria von Ilosvay
 Second Norn - Georgine von Milinkovic
 Third Norn – Mina Bolotine

Astrid Varnay and Martha Mödl alternated in the role of Brünnhilde in July and August 1955 at Bayreuth; this is the earlier cycle with Varnay as Brünnhilde in live composite recordings; Mödl may be heard in single performances of *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*.

The stereo sound here is really excellent for such old live recordings, although there is some noise from stage machinery, the Testament label prices are steep. There is a palpable sense of excitement in that opening E flat major chord, its impact all the more immediate owing to that superbly detailed sound – I just wish the Rhinedaughters were as distinguished as Krauss' or Furtwängler's; they swoop. There is compensation in Neidlinger's incomparably black and vehement "Schwarz-Alberich",

however, and there is another great advantage here in the chance to hear Hotter still in best, majestic voice, despite just a hint of wobble from time to time. Georgine von Milinkovic is fine bit not as steady, positive or rich of voice as, for example, Christa Ludwig for Solti a few years later. Similarly, Blankenheim is loud and forceful as Donner, but a bit lumpen, not as virile and thrilling as Wächter. Traxel is light and lovely as Froh.

In *Die Walküre*, Brouwenstijn as a febrile, shimmering Sieglinde is as fine here as she would be for Leinsdorf in the 1961 studio recording and her presence is welcome as a very feminine, vulnerable Guttrune, contrasting with the power of Varnay's Brünnhilde. Vinay is almost the equal of Vickers, while Greindl is in his element as the two brutes, Hunding then Hagen in *Götterdämmerung*. In *Siegfried*, Paul Kuën's excellent Mime is very much a known quality, as he appears in several cycles in this era, Ilse Hollweg is a light, attractive Woodbird, Maria von Ilosvay a powerful, impressive Erda, and Greindl repeats his menacing Fafner. Despite the general all-round excellence of the cast, I am no more convinced by Windgassen here as the hero of the last two operas than I am by his debut performances as Siegfried for Keilberth then Krauss in the same season three years earlier. His tenor, for all his musicianship, tends to whine and simply isn't robust or large enough and he too frequently resorts to barking and guttural noises for emphasis. However, he is now technically more secure, both rhythmically and in intonation; his best spells are the Forging Scene in *Siegfried*, where he summons up an admirable element of heroic steel in his voice and displays considerable endurance and the Forest Murmurs episode where he delivers the text touchingly. In brief, he is as good as you'll get, not being Melchior or Vickers. Varnay scoops a little but is in magisterial voice throughout the conclusion of *Siegfried* and the whole of *Götterdämmerung*, where Uhde is, as always, a thoroughly convincing Gunther.

There is no doubting Keilberth's affinity with the score or the beauty of the orchestral playing, which, despite some blips, comes across as full, warm, and well balanced with the voices. There are equally well-cast and played cycles from the same era by Krauss, Knappertsbusch and Kempe but there is equally no doubt that the stereo sound here, which is even better than Pristine's re-processing of Krauss' 1953 mono set into Ambient Stereo, gives it the advantage for the modern listener.

Rudolf Kempe – 1957 (live; mono) Walhall; Testament
Orchestra - Covent Garden

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Hans Hotter
Fricka - Georgine von Milinkovic
Loge - Erich Witte
Mime - Peter Klein
Alberich - Otakar Kraus
Freia - Elisabeth Lindermeier
Froh - Edgar Evans
Donner - Robert Allman
Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
Fasolt - Kurt Böhme
Fafner - Frederick (Friedrich) Dalberg
Woglinde - Joan Sutherland
Wellgunde - Una Hale
Floßhilde - Marjorie Thomas
Siegfried
Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
Mime - Peter Klein

Die Walküre

Siegmond - Ramón Vinay
Sieglinde - Sylvia Fisher
Hunding - Frederick (Friedrich) Dalberg
Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson
Wotan - Hans Hotter
Fricka - Georgine von Milinkovic
Gerhilde - Amy Shuard
Ortlinde - Una Hale
Waltraute - Edith Coates
Schwertleite - Jean Watson
Helmwige - June Grant
Siegrune - Noreen Berry
Grimgerde - Barbara Howitt
Roßweiße - Marjorie Thomas
Götterdämmerung
Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson
Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen

Wanderer - Hans Hotter
 Brünhilde - Birgit Nilsson
 Alberich - Otakar Kraus
 Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
 Fafner - Frederick (Friedrich) Dalberg
 Waldvogel - Jeannette Sinclair

Hagen - Kurt Böhme
 Alberich - Otakar Kraus
 Gunther - Hermann Uhde
 Gutrune - Elisabeth Lindermeier
 Waltraute - Maria von Ilosvay
 Woglinde - Joan Sutherland
 Wellgunde - Una Hale
 Floßhilde - Marjorie Thomas
 First Norn - Maria von Ilosvay
 Second Norn - Constance Shacklock
 Third Norn - Amy Shuard

Kempe was always a conductor for detail, subtlety and restraint, an enemy to bombast. Apart from the superiority of his conducting, there are other great advantages: a young Birgit Nilsson, Hotter still in fine voice and other big names among the cast, many being British stalwarts and featuring Joan Sutherland as a radiant Woglinde; the downside is that it is only in mediocre mono sound, being from tapes privately made by Lord Harewood and thus not as distinct as the stereo recordings of Keilberth's 1955 *Ring*, also on the Testament label or Pristine's remasterings of comparable cycles from the same decade. Good as some of the singers are here, they are either, as in the Hotter's case, heard in better sound elsewhere, or surpassed in other recordings, as Otakar Kraus is by Gustav Neidlinger, who was the pre-eminent Alberich for almost two decades. As such, despite the beauty of Kempe's direction, this cannot be a contender for first choice.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1957 (live; mono) Walhall
 Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Hans Hotter
 Fricka - Georgine von Milinkovic
 Loge - Ludwig Suthaus
 Mime - Gerhard Stolze
 Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
 Freia - Elisabeth Grümmer
 Froh - Josef Traxel
 Donner - Toni Blankenheim
 Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
 Fasolt - Arnold Van Mill
 Fafner - Josef Greindl
 Woglinde - Dorothea Siebert
 Wellgunde - Paula Lenchner(-Schmidt)
 Floßhilde - Elisabeth Schärtel

Siegfried

Siegfried - Bernd Aldenhoff
 Mime - Paul Kuën
 Wanderer - Hans Hotter
 Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
 Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
 Erda - Maria von Ilosvay
 Fafner - Josef Greindl
 Waldvogel - Ilse Hollweg

Die Walküre

Siegmond - Ramón Vinay
 Sieglinde - Birgit Nilsson
 Hunding - Josef Greindl
 Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
 Wotan - Hans Hotter
 Fricka - Georgine von Milinkovic
 Gerhilde - Paula Lenchner(-Schmidt)
 Ortlinde - Gerda Lammers
 Waltraute - Elisabeth Schärtel
 Schwertleite - Maria von Ilosvay
 Helmwige - Hilde Scheppan
 Siegrune - Helena Bader
 Grimgerde - Georgine von Milinkovic
 Roßweiße - Hetty Plümacher

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
 Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
 Hagen - Josef Greindl
 Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
 Gunther - Hermann Uhde
 Gutrune - Elisabeth Grümmer
 Waltraute - Maria von Ilosvay
 Woglinde - Dorothea Siebert
 Wellgunde - Paula Lenchner(-Schmidt)

Floßhilde - Elisabeth Schärtel
 First Norn - Birgit Nilsson
 Second Norn - Elisabeth Schärtel
 Third Norn - Maria von Ilosvay

Das Rheingold:

As I had already reviewed and admired other live recordings from the *Ring* cycles in the late 50's conducted by Knappertsbusch, I wanted to add a *Das Rheingold* but couldn't decide between the 1957 or the 1958 recordings. In the end, as they were so cheap, I bought both for purposes of comparison.

In truth, both have their advantages and demerits, but let's start with the mono sound: in 1957 the recording is very close, amplifying the audience coughing and stage noises, providing a more muddled result and greater tape hiss but also more detail. The 1958 recording sounds completely different: there's much more space around the music and a higher volume is desirable for better listening. There is much less extraneous noise although a bit more of noisy stage machinery. Swings and roundabouts: both very listenable.

Common to both is Kna's weighty, sometimes leisurely conducting - somewhat more so in 1958 but never damagingly - and real mastery over the ebb and flow of the drama. Common to the cast are: Hans Hotter's famous Wotan, occasionally a little rockier in 1958 but always grand and imposing; the only Wotan to rival him in majesty was George London. Elisabeth Grümmer is a silvery, febrile Freia, Josef Greindl is as black and dour a Fafner as you would expect from this Bayreuth regular and the stately Maria von Ilosvay delivers a mighty Erda. Then apart from having the same Woglinde in two decent teams of Rhinedaughters, all the other cast members are different in 1958 from 1957.

Again, there are gains and losses; although Frans Andersson makes a perfectly acceptable Alberich in 1958, it is cruel to compare it with the tour de force of Gustav Neidlinger's most famous incarnation, immortalised on the Solti-Culshaw studio recording. Neither Donner is ideal compared with Eberhardt Waechter: Toni Blankenheim is more virile and forceful than the rather under-powered Erik Saeden but unfortunately he also has a beat in his baritone. Ludwig Suthaus as Loge is clearly past his best by 1957 and resorts to effortful shouting and Sprechstimme, despite not really conveying much of Loge's artfulness; Fritz Uhl the following year is much better, providing a really nuanced account. Both Frohs are eminent tenors; enough said. The two artists singing Fricka are similarly celebrated mezzos with grand voices: honours even. Both Mimes are famous interpreters of the old school: lots of whining and mewling but vivid and convincing. Arnold van Mill has a much more varied and interesting bass voice than Theo Adam as Fasolt, although at least at this early stage of his career the latter's wobble is under control.

So; both are good, both a mixed bag, neither perfect by any means but providing a night at the opera I would love to have heard. The best things about both recordings are Knappertsbusch and Hotter, so I would advise you to go with your own tastes when choosing between them or do as I have done and buy both. Meanwhile, as I am considering the 1957 cycle as a whole, it is clearly wholly acceptable, even though both Suthaus and Blankenheim are inferior.

Die Walküre:

Stick a pin in any of the live recordings from Bayreuth of this opera from 1951 until 1960 and you will find a performance of stature unequalled today. First it was Keilberth at the helm drawing on a remarkable roster of artists, then Krauss in 1953, Keilberth again in 1954 and then Knappertsbusch took over from 1956 until Kempe in 1960. What a galaxy of talent amongst conductors and singers! Regulars included Astrid Varnay, Josef Greindl and of course Hans Hotter, in towering form in the 50's.

I personally prefer Kna's massive, emphatic authority to Keilberth's more fleet and febrile manner but both are masters of the Wagnerian idiom.

I have recently been listening to all three: Keilberth's 1952 *Die Walküre* in comparison with the same conductor in 1955 and Knappertsbusch's 1957 performance. What a joy to hear so many big, rounded, echte Wagnerian voices! In terms of the mono sound, the later two have a definite advantage, being considerably clearer and fuller although the earlier one is still highly listenable. Both the 1952 and 1957 performances are afflicted by random, inconsiderate coughing but the 1955 is considerably better in that regard, despite a few tape slips and the fact that the sound will always be a bit muddy and distant. Still, the voices are very present and all three feature Hotter in his prime, Varnay in shining voice as both Brünnhilde and Sieglinde (1955) and Bayreuth's Resident Cave-Man, Josef Greindl as a Hunding of awesome presence and menace. Keilberth has a terrific team of Valkyries in both 1952 and 1955 who outshine their 1957 counterparts but despite Treptow and Borkh being a fine pair of Volsung Twins, both are less impressive than the wonderful pairing of a young Birgit Nilsson - soon, in 1955, to be promoted to Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*, then *Siegfried* in 1957 - as Sieglinde and the tireless, baritone Sigmund of Ramón Vinay who is in magnificent voice throughout, even though he is clearly pushed to his limits by the peroration of Act 1. All Nilsson's virtues are much in evidence, especially her steady, shining power and thrilling top notes - and she even does the "Rysanek Scream" when Siegfried extracts Nothung from the Ash-Tree; Varnay does the same to chilling effect in 1955 but is rather grand and commanding for the role of Sieglinde, who should evince some vulnerability. She of course alternated with Martha Mödl as Brünnhilde and Sieglinde even within the same season, and to my taste both are preferable in the bigger, even more demanding role where their dramatic sopranos shine, Mödl is superb in 1955 despite the characteristic slight hoarseness of tone, somewhat tentative top notes - she soon lost them and migrated to mezzo roles - and the pronounced glottal break, which she somehow converts into a compelling emotive device. She is especially striking in the "Todesverkündigung", steady, constant and inexorable in her attempt to persuade Sigmund to accompany her to Valhalla. However, Borkh is fine for Keilberth in 1952: steady and pure-voiced with exceptional clarity of diction. Treptow as Sigmund is a bit nasal and hard-edged - more so than in his famous Tristan for Knappertsbusch - with a slight tendency to bleat and bark, but he is still very acceptable. Both Frickas are fine artists, Malaniuk grander but von Milinkovic more feminine and lighter voiced; she also gamely doubles in 1955 as the Valkyrie Grimgerde.

Ultimately, I think Kna in comparison with Keilberth is the greater conductor, although Keilberth, if slightly fleeter and more restrained, lacks nothing in lyricism – and on Walhall, the sound for Kna is warmer and more resonant and his Twins are more grateful on the ear than for Keilberth in 1952. However, it is the last twenty minutes of this extraordinary work which set the seal on its quality: Hotter is even more involved and searingly intense in both 1955 and 1957 than in 1952; his delivery of key texts such as "Der Freier als ich, der Gott", "So küsst er die Gottheit von dir!" and "Der Augen, leuchtendes Paar" is suffused with nobility and the tender pathos of his paternal anguish goes straight to the heart. That directness not a little enhanced by both conductors' control over the mounting tension; this is the apotheosis of Wagnerian drama.

Siegfried:

Yet another superb live performance from the Bayreuth *Ring* under Knappertsbusch, who was at the helm in the late 50's directing unmatched casts. The mono sound is really good for nearly sixty years old, with minimal distortion and the voices well to the fore, yet the orchestra also emerges cleanly - as too, does a bit of audience coughing.

Knappertsbusch was no martinet and famously lax about precision of ensemble or even rehearsal, but he always seems to exhort his band to embrace the spirit of the music and create a riveting performance, full of drive, passion and fluidity without sounding either rushed or unduly enervated;

those who criticise him have no heart and evidently prize technical precision over musicality. The way he builds to the climax of Act 1 is especially gripping.

The cast really is exemplary, especially by modern standards. Paul Kuën is a singing Mime; he is no barker or whiner and has crystalline diction. Bernd Aldenhoff is firm and tireless, sometimes a tad light and he occasionally yelps or snatches at notes above the stave which tend to wobble a bit, but he is generally secure up to his top C; the Forging scene is riveting. Hotter's voluminous bass-baritone suffers from a touch of the hollow wheeziness that afflicted him during the summer allergy season but exudes enormous character and authority; his scene with Maria von Ilosvay's commanding Erda (sounding very similar in timbre to the great Welsh contralto Helen Watts) is high Wagnerian drama at its noble, agonised best. Greindl is perfect as the baleful Fafner, oddly touching in his death, and Neidlinger equally dark and malicious in his most famous role as Alberich.

That leaves Astrid Varnay, vast and gleaming of voice. Alternating with Mödl and Nilsson worldwide, Varnay was pre-eminent in the role of Brünnhilde and here permitted the luxury of singing for only the last half hour instead of the four hours of *Götterdämmerung*, in which Brünnhilde is almost constantly on stage. She is occasionally a little shrill but rises magnificently to the peroration of Act IV - and all credit to Aldenhoff for keeping up with her, as he indeed has been mostly on stage for the best part of three and a half hours before falling for his auntie.

Götterdämmerung

The quality of casting pervading this cycle continues through to having Birgit Nilsson as penetrating First Norn! A third Heldentenor in Wolfgang Windgassen steps up to sing Siegfried here, succeeding Vinay as Siegmund and Aldenhoff in *Siegfried*, so some might have preferred greater unity in casting but all three are estimable Wagnerians. Windgassen is never exactly fresh of voice but he sounds as good here as you will hear him anywhere. A particular advantage lies in having Uhde and Grümmer as the sibling Gibichung; the rest of the cast, headed by Varnay's warm, womanly Brünnhilde and the ubiquitous Alberich of Neidlinger, are dependable Bayreuth regulars who deliver just as you would expect. Varnay's top notes are a tad tentative in the culminating Immolation Scene but she still impresses. Audience coughing is especially prominent during quiet orchestral passages such as that which precedes the lovers' first entrance but the sweep of Knappertsbusch conducting is as seductive as ever.

A final bonus is how affordably these Walhall issues have been made available; you can pick them up for a fraction of studio recordings and hear Golden Age Wagner, albeit in limited mono sound.

Georg Solti – 1958-65 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Das Rheingold

Wotan - George London
Fricka - Kirsten Flagstad
Loge - Set Svanholm
Mime - Paul Kuën
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Freia - Claire Watson
Froh - Waldemar Kmentt
Donner - Eberhard Wächter (Waechter)
Erda - Jean Madeira
Fasolt - Walter Kreppel
Fafner - Kurt Böhme

Die Walküre

Siegmund - James King
Sieglinde - Régine Crespin
Hunding - Gottlob Frick
Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson
Wotan - Hans Hotter
Fricka - Christa Ludwig
Gerhilde - Vera Schlosser
Ortlinde - Helga Dernesch
Waltraute - Brigitte Fassbaender
Schwertleite - Helen Watts
Helmwige - Berit Lindholm

Woglinde - Oda Balsborg
Wellgunde - Hetty Plümacher
Floßhilde - Ira Malaniuk

Siegfried

Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
Mime - Gerhard Stolze
Wanderer - Hans Hotter
Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Erda - Marga Höffgen
Fafner - Kurt Böhme
Waldvogel - Joan Sutherland

Siegrune - Vera Little
Grimgerde - Marilyn Tyler
Roßweiße - Claudia Hellmann

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson
Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
Hagen - Gottlob Frick
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Gunther - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Gutrune - Claire Watson
Waltraute - Christa Ludwig
Woglinde - Lucia Popp
Wellgunde - Gwyneth Jones
Floßhilde - Maureen Guy
First Norn - Helen Watts
Second Norn - Grace Hoffman
Third Norn - Anita Väikki

Das Rheingold

This is the best of Solti's studio tetralogy, crowned by the magnificent Wotan of George London. Everything works here, from the guest appearance of Flagstad's Fricka to Svanholm's crafty, mellifluous Loge to Neidlinger's malevolent Alberich – and there are sonic highlights too, such as the striking of Donner's hammer which has never been surpassed. No other recording approaches it.

Die Walküre:

I have long avoided this instalment of the Solti *Ring* on the reasonable basis that there is a touch of "Hamlet without the Prince" about it. Hans Hotter inevitably forms its sole weakness in that although he was only in his mid-fifties, a long career, in combination with his asthma and perhaps simply not being in best voice at the time meant that his rather laboured singing, with effortful top E's and F's and the "woofiness" of tone which intermittently afflicted his bass-baritone compromises the effectiveness of the recording as a whole. To hear him at his magisterial best, you must return to the cycles of the 50's under Keilberth and Krauss. Much of what he does still carries massive authority and pathos but the wobble and strain are sadly evident; he is considerably better in the *Siegfried* recorded three years earlier,

Otherwise, I find absolutely nothing wrong with this set. Some find Solti convicted of his besetting fault of being too aggressive and driven but if anything I find him considerably more refined and reflective compared with the thrilling but relentless propulsiveness of my favourite "stand-alone" recording from 1961 under Leinsdorf with a far more virile Wotan in George London. The cleaned-up sound robs the original recording of some of its breadth and atmosphere, aiming for greater forensic clarity and differentiation between instrumental strands but one's reaction to that depends so much upon personal taste and equipment. The VPO plays wonderfully and the rest of the cast is superb.

James King is not as heroic or impassioned as Vickers but he is damn good - really exciting in the "Nothung" scene. "Crespinette" is sweeter of tone and less inclined to rasp than was sometimes the case and she really gets under the skin of her role. Frick is ideal as Hunding: black, menacing and brutal, just has was for Furtwängler. That era was stuffed with great Wagnerian basses - Greindl, Böhme, Langdon, Ward and then Talvela and Ridderbusch - but Frick's highly individual sound still reigns supreme for many. Christa Ludwig is in richest, most ringing voice: formidable without becoming a screeching harridan. Birgit Nilsson remains a force of nature, her gleaming top B's and C's hit squarely

on without a hint of slide and now adding some extra tenderness to her steelier assumption for Leinsdorf.

This might comparatively be the "weakest" of Solti's tetralogy but still constitutes a great achievement.

Siegfried:

Sometimes I like to revisit old favourites to check if my perception or appreciation of them has changed. I do not have the latest remastering of this *Siegfried* only the old 1984 CD version but the sound was always spectacular and subsequent issues have only improved it. I have always found *Siegfried* to be the most problematic in the tetralogy with regard to finding the best recording and have never found a better sung account than either Melchior with Florence Easton in the 1927-32 "Potted Ring" or with Flagstad at the Met in 1937, but both are in primitive sound. Similarly, Furtwängler's RAI recording is admirable but in scratchy mono, despite a superb remastering by Pristine, which leaves us with either of Windgassen's recordings with Böhm or Solti here. Unfortunately, try as I might, I cannot hear the young hero in Windgassen's rather thin and quavery Siegfried; he was a decent singer with considerable stamina but the basic quality of tone was never very impressive and he too often resorts to barking. The nearest I know to the ideal in modern sound is Goodall's Alberto Remedios - but of course that's in English. I also much enjoy Norman Bailey's Wotan on that ENO recording; he was in firmer, fresher voice than Hans Hotter here. However, despite some blaring and an intermittently troublesome wobble, Hotter is still impressive in 1962; he portrays a mightily dignified, authoritative and expressive Wotan. By the time of *Die Walküre* four years he was in decidedly poorer voice.

So two of the lead singers are fine if hardly ideal. About the quality of Birgit Nilsson's performance, however, there can be little debate; she is phenomenal, nearly dwarfing Windgassen in their final duet. Power, warmth and tenderness combine to make her assumption of Brünnhilde one of the greats. The brilliance of the VPO's playing under a wholly inspired Solti hardly needs much comment either - neither does the contribution of the supporting cast, from Stolze's wheedling Mime, to Neidlinger's black Alberich, to Kurt Böhm's cavernous Fafner, to Sutherland's sparkling Woodbird.

Windgassen is much the same for Böhm only four years older - he was admirably consistent; Adam is acceptable as Wotan but less massive and no steadier than Hotter; Nilsson is if anything even more impressive for Böhm but that is a live Bayreuth recording and generally less impressively cast, with Windgassen understandably audibly tiring towards the end. Böhm's conducting is taut and propulsive but I think Solti finds more tension and excitement, so this Decca classic remains the best option.

Götterdämmerung

If ever I want to convince anyone of the greatness of this recording, I turn to the oath-swearing trio concluding Act 2, when Brünnhilde, Gunther and Hagen, superbly sung by Nilsson, Fischer-Dieskau and Frick respectively, vow to wreak revenge on the unsuspecting Siegfried – it's electric. The whole thing tingles throughout and is far superior to Karajan's smooth and essentially urbane account. Frick's Hagen is far more brutal and frightening than Ridderbusch's, for all that the latter has a beautiful voice – or rather, he lacks menace precisely because his voice is so beautiful, making Hagen a somewhat more complex and even sympathetic character. The supporting cast is impressive – although the same is true for Karajan, but overall I prefer Solti's raw passion to Karajan's noble grandeur.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1961-62 (live radio broadcast; mono/Ambient Stereo) Pristine Audio
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Das Rheingold

Wotan - George London
Fricka - Irene Dalis
Loge - Karl Liebl
Mime - Paul Kuën
Alberich - Ralph Herbert
Freia - Heidi Krall
Froh - Robert Nagy
Donner - Norman Mittelman
Erda - Jean Madeira
Fasolt - Jerome Hines
Fafner - Ernst Wiemann
Woglinde - Martina Arroyo
Wellgunde - Rosalind Elias
Floßhilde - Mignon Dunn

Siegfried

Siegfried – Hans Hopf
Mime - Paul Kuën
Brünnhilde – Birgit Nilsson
Wanderer – George London
Erda – Jean Madeira
Alberich – Ralph Herbert
Fafner – Gottlob Frick
Waldvogel – Martina Arroyo

Die Walküre

Brünnhilde: Birgit Nilsson
Siegmund: Jon Vickers
Sieglinde: Gladys Kuchta
Wotan: Otto Edelmann
Fricka: Irene Dalis
Hunding: Ernst Wiedemann
Gerhilde: Carlotta Ordassy
Grimgerde: Mary MacKenzie
Helmwige: Heidi Krall
Ortlinde: Martina Arroyo
Roßweiße: Margaret Roggero
Schwertleite: Gladys Kriese
Siegfrune: Helen Vanni
Waltraute: Mignon Dunn

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson
Siegfried - Hans Hopf
Hagen - Gottlob Frick
Alberich - Ralph Herbert
Gunther - Norman Mittelmann
Gutrune - Gladys Kuchta
Waltraute - Irene Dalis
Woglinde - Martina Arroyo
Wellgunde - Rosalind Elias
Flosshilde - Mignon Dunn
First Norn - Jean Madeira
Second Norn - Irene Dalis
Third Norn - Martina Arroyo

Das Rheingold

This was the start of the first Met Ring cycle for four years; the distinguished cast was mostly new, with the exception of Hines, Madeira and Elias but the production dated back to 1948. Paul Kuën was making his Met debut, while George London was making singing Wotan for the first time on stage. He had of course been singing at the Met since 1951 and had recorded Wotan for Solti in 1958. Even the trio of Rhinedaughters were either already stars or soon to become so, including such names as a young Martina Arroyo as Woglinde. Leinsdorf continues to be under-rated as a Wagner conductor, and indeed in general; recording of *Die Walküre* made the same year as this performance continues to be my prime recommendation and you may hear Pristine's excellent remastering of his superb account of that opera starring Melchior in 1940, which I reviewed.

This performance was sung in accordance with Wagner's wishes, straight through without a break, and proceeds with great impetus. It begins with Milton Cross' introduction, then the clarity and warmth of the reprocessed sound is immediately startling: rich in the bass and exceptionally detailed, every strand of the instrumentation prominent. The microphones were obviously well positioned. The twenty-six-year-old Arroyo's vibrant soprano is instantly recognisable, as are the warmer lower voices of her two sisters, but Ralph Herbert is merely competent, being a rather dull-voiced Alberich, lacking the snarl and bite of the best. He simply has the wrong voice for the role and his sneezing and "ho-ho-

ing" are a bit stagey, too – and I'm not sure why, having nabbed the ring, he gives us two valedictory versions of the latter, one apparently backstage and one up close. However, he by no means undermines the impact of the performance as a whole.

The coughing during the lovely brass introduction to Scene 2 is annoying but the playing is lovely. In my estimation, no singer ever had a voice better suited to portray Wotan than George London, and he is here in his absolute prime before his enforced, premature retirement at 46. "Hehrer, herrlicher Bau!" is thrilling. Dalis' Fricka is a real presence: insistent without being shrewish, and the giants are a mightily imposing pair. I had expected Jerome Hines to impress as Fasolt, but Ernst Wiemann, previously unknown to me, is, if anything, even more commanding. Robert Nagy is an excellent Froh and Heldentenor Karl Liebl makes a Loge firmer and more virile than usual, bright and incisive of voice – the best I have heard. Note, too, how the strings sing through Loge's Narration, track 12; Leinsdorf knows how to bring out the lyrical aspects of Wagner's score as well as engender excitement. Heidi Krall, who famously substituted for an ailing Zinka Milanov in Bruno Walter's live, 1959 Verdi Requiem, makes a febrile, affecting Freia.

The sound for the forging scene where Wotan and Loge trick Alberich is really atmospheric, the enslaved Nibelungs' screams are chilling and Kuën is an ideal Mime. Jean Madeira is vast of voice, stentorian of utterance and suitably sibylline; her brief appearance is a highlight Norman Mittelmann's Donner is firm and ringing and his hammer-stroke makes a proper impact. London is as dominant in the concluding passage, as the gods trop over the Rainbow Bridge into Valhalla, as he is for Solti and, if anything, Liebl's Loge is stronger than Svanholm's.

What an experience it must have been to be in the audience that evening to hear such an ensemble perform the first work in Wagner's tetralogy almost to perfection.

Die Walküre

This was the second instalment in the first complete *Ring* cycle since Leinsdorf had conducted it uncut in 1940 and Nilsson's first complete *Ring*, too, although she had sung individual Brünnhilde previously at the Met and in Bayreuth.

The sound is very clear, if a bit brittle with wiry strings, but the greatest drawback is the persistent, irritating coughing throughout the whole performance: the beautiful orchestral passages in Act 1 in CD 1 track 9, following Siegmund's narration, just before Hagen's baleful good night and through "Ein Schwert verhiß mir der Vater" and the Todesverkündigung both sound as though they were recorded in a TB sanatorium. There is also the constant sound of running water through the first two Acts, which was presumably a feature of the stage set and unavoidable flaws in the tape, but these distractions are mitigated by Pristine's typically effective Ambient Stereo XR remastering. The voices are very forward but the balance with the orchestra is good enough. The break at the end of CD 2, presumably for the purpose of allowing transfer onto three rather than four CDs is abrupt and unfortunate. The obvious comparison is with Leinsdorf's studio recording for Decca with the LSO in Walthamstow Town Hall earlier the same year, in which Vickers and Nilsson sang the same roles but all the other parts are sung by different singers, including, of course, George London as Wotan. That has long been my favourite studio recording of this opera and the stereo sound is of course superior.

Leinsdorf is gentler and more inclined to bring out the poetry of Wagner's music here than in that studio recording. His singers – especially Vickers in his Act 1 narrative – are similarly more reflective and poetic; however, they rise to the moments of high drama, too. I cannot fault his pacing or phrasing and the Met orchestra plays magnificently, especially in the final scene.

The young Jon Vickers is in sovereign form and his "Nun weißt du, fragende Frau, warum ich Friedmund nicht heiße" is sung in a meltingly poignant half voice. He had already triumphed as Siegmund at Bayreuth three years earlier under Knappertsbusch and at Covent Garden for Solti and at the Met the previous year, but there are fewer errors here and his voice is, if anything, even finer, both tenderer and more powerful.

Kuchta has a fuller, warmer voice than we sometimes here, closer to Leonie Rysanek in timbre – and she does her own version of the "Rysanek scream" when Siegmund wrenches Nothung from the trunk of the ash tree. She is secure if a tad stately compared with nervier, more febrile readings from such as Rysanek or Brouwenstijn but firm and secure.

Wiedemann has a big, rounded bass and inhabits the role of Hunding credibly, without the variety of tone we hear from Frick or Talvela. Irene Dalis is as good as any Freia on record, her mezzo rich and vibrant; she was singing anything and everything superbly around this time at the Met – Brangäne, Venus, Amneris, Azucena and Eboli – because she could. The Valkyries are an impressive bunch, including the instantly recognisable voice of Martina Arroyo. Obviously the star of the show is Nilsson and her familiar laser-tones and voluminous projection carry the day. She is not as verbally acute as in later performances but vocally she is resplendent and the audience roars its appreciation at the curtain calls.

Edelmann is more than adequate as Wotan, using the text expressively and showing considerable stamina in the role but his bass is without the massive authority of Hotter or London; he is not always ideally steady and his voice is more nasal and distinctly baritone in timbre where perhaps a darker bass-baritone sound is better. His "Wo ist Brünnhild', wo die Verbrecherin?" lacks might and menace and to my ears he occasionally sounds over-parted but he mostly rises to the grandeur of "Leb wohl, du kühnes, herrliches Kind". Unfortunately, he then falters badly over the words and music in "Der Augen leuchtendes Paar", crooning and sliding, muddling the text then stopping to sing altogether until he can recover his place with the help of the prompter, and finally getting a frog in his throat on "muss es scheidend sich schließen". These are really quite big blots on what should be a climactic passage and it takes him a while to recover his equilibrium and deliver a good summoning of Loge and his fire.

Edelmann's errors and the incessant coughing from the Met audience are distinct disincentives to listening to this but it is otherwise great performance, catching the singing of two great Wagnerians on the wing very ably supported by their co-singers and conductor.

Siegfried

I [previously reviewed](#) the issue on the Walhall label of the radio broadcast, with Milton Cross' commentary, of this live, uncut performance and was less than impressed, finding it to be hampered by several things: first and primarily poor sound. However, my impressions were clearly negatively skewed by the sonics and as this new issue from Pristine is very much better from that point of view, I think much better of it; Andrew Rose has performed his usual sterling remastering into Ambient Stereo which marks a huge improvement. The second problem was the persistent coughing, often throughout the quietest passages, such as the entire four and a half minutes of the atmospheric orchestral Prologue to Act II; that persists but Pristine's enhanced sound, instead of making that irritation all the more apparent, has managed to bring forward the voices and, to a lesser extent, the orchestra, while recessing and greatly diminishing the audibility of the coughers, who never let up for a moment. That improvement in the sound also has the effect of emphasising the third caveat: the sometimes wobbly and rather wooden singing of the lead tenor Hans Hopf. His very baritone tenor has here begun to deteriorate somewhat since his heyday in the fifties and he sometimes has to heave his voice up for the high notes. However, he improves noticeably as the performance progresses and

has the heft, stamina, virile tone and the ringing top notes for passages such as the Forging Scene, the conclusion of the scene when Siegfried smashes Wotan's staff and the passage just prior to Brünnhilde's awakening. We would be grateful for such a tenor today for all his vocal and interpretative shortcomings.

The other singers are mostly very fine: Paul Kuën owned the role of Mime throughout the 50's and early 60's but had only just made his Met debut in *Das Rheingold*. He gives us a proper singing Mime, despite the occasional yelp. Even better, are Birgit Nilsson and George London, two of the greatest voices ever to undertake the roles of the Wanderer and Brünnhilde respectively and thanks to the rejuvenated sound, we are now more able to hear the quality of their contributions. London's singing reminds us what was lost by his having to retire too early from singing; his is one of those powerful, metallic yet beautiful voices, like Corelli's, that I simply drink in. Nilsson's appearance is of course deferred until the last scene of Act 3; it's almost like a night off for her from singing Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* and the enhanced sound now reveals her to be in much better voice than I had thought when I first heard this in the previous, inferior issue.

A weakness is Ralph Herbert's Alberich, which is well characterised but dry and undistinguished of voice, and the impact of Gottlob Frick's imposing Fafner is somewhat reduced by his being placed so far back in the aural picture. Martina Arroyo's pure and powerful Woodbird is a delight; the role is too often undercast. I warm more to Jean Madeira's Erda this time around; she is stentorian and authoritative.

Leinsdorf conducts with verve and passion and sustains tension in an opera famously rather devoid of much incident for long spells; only the last scene fails to generate enough excitement, sounding rather deliberate – which is a pity, as it must obviously be climactic.

This new issue from Pristine makes all previous incarnations redundant, it is so superior in sound quality.

Götterdämmerung

Just a glance at the names on the roster for this *Götterdämmerung* is enough to whet the appetite of any Wagnerite, especially as we know that Hans Hopf, occasionally something of a liability, was in best form for this run of Ring performances under Leinsdorf, uncut at the conductor's insistence. We first hear a trio of Norns as good as any that could be assembled anywhere in the world, Bayreuth included; Jean Madeira intones the First Norn with a booming lower register and artists of the calibre of Irene Dalis and Rosalind Elias double roles; these were international star-soloists here singing supporting roles. Dalis is prodigious of voice as Waltraute, providing an intense narration of Wotan's descent into despair but Martina Arroyo is the finest of all, singing with such bell-like clarity and power that you would assume that she would go on to become a renowned Wagnerian soprano rather than a renowned spinto in the Italian repertoire. With Gottlob Frick's moving from Fafner to Hagen and the introduction of Gladys Kuchta as Guttrune and Norman Mittelman as Gunther the continuation of superlative quality in the singing is assured. You could be forgiven for sometimes thinking that Thomas Stewart was singing Guttrune rather than Mittelman, their Heldenbariton voices are so similar and Kuchta gives a much more positive, richer-voiced and better sung Guttrune than is often the case. Frick is the incarnation of black malice and cunning as Hagen; just occasionally he yells a bit on top notes but his "Hoi-hos" are splendidly resonant and secure; I have otherwise rarely heard him with steadier or more concentrated tone and his characterisation is compelling. "Hier sitz ich zur Wacht" is riveting. The Rhinedaughters are wonderfully seductive and full-voiced. The only relative weakness resides in the brief reappearance of Ralph Herbert's rather grey-voiced Alberich; his hoarseness is especially apparent when his baritone is pitted in conversation against Frick's treacle-toned bass - and the coughing here just goes on and on, while the opening of Act 3 might as well be set in a TB ward.

Indeed, the Met audience makes its audible contribution throughout the opera, hacking with shameful indifference to the music all through quiet passages such as the beautiful introduction to "Zu neuen Taten". Leinsdorf meanwhile is securing lovely playing from the orchestra, directing with plenty of momentum but without rushing. The vocal phenomenon which was Nilsson is well matched by Hopf who has the heft and stamina to keep up with her, despite the intermittent appearance of too obtrusive a beat in his tenor - and he sensitively in his Act 3 reminiscing, coping magnificently with the persistently high tessitura. Nilsson's last "Heil" in the opening duet is like laser beam and she sounds in freshest voice throughout, "pinging" one top note after another. The twenty-minute finale finds her emitting a steady, gleaming flow of effulgent tone and she sounds younger and more girlish here than in her other recordings despite the searing power.

I find my admiration for Leinsdorf's direction enhanced by the way he manages the transitions between scenes and generates the easy grandeur of the big orchestral set pieces like "Siegfried's Rhine Journey" and the "Funeral Music". The chorus is rollicking and rumbustious in its praise of "Hagen der Grimme" and the sense of ensemble here is strong, with few of the errors which so easily mar live performances. As an example of that precision, the crucial two oath-swearing scenes, "Blühenden Lebens labendes Blut" in Act 1 and the "Vengeance Trio" concluding Act 2 are taut and thrilling.

By this last instalment of the tetralogy, the listener who has journeyed through the previous three is in danger of taking for granted the quality of both the performance and the revitalised Pristine sound; their consistency is truly admirable. Just as this cycle opened with a deeply impressive *Das Rheingold*, it closes with what is in many ways the best performance of all; the blips were in Edelmann's Wotan in *Die Walküre*. It's just a pity that such a good performance was not accorded the consideration it deserved from an audience prepared to stifle its bronchial intrusions; if you can screen that out this is a winner.

Ultimately, the incessant coughing and blemishes such as Edelmann's errors as Wotan in *Die Walküre* prevent this from being a prime recommendation but that should not detract too much from the pleasure of hearing a *Ring* cycle of a quality we can only dream of today.

Karl Böhm – 1966-67 (live composite; stereo) Decca
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Theo Adam
Fricka - Annelies Burmeister
Loge - Wolfgang Windgassen
Mime - Erwin Wohlfahrt
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Freia - Anja Silja
Froh - Hermin Esser
Donner - Gerd Nienstedt
Erda - Vera Soukupová
Fasolt - Martti Talvela
Fafner - Kurt Böhme
Woglinde - Dorothea Siebert
Wellgunde - Helga Dernesch
Floßhilde - Ruth Hesse
Siegfried
Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen

Die Walküre

Siegmond - James King
Sieglinde - Leonie Rysanek
Hunding - Gerd Nienstedt
Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson
Wotan - Theo Adam
Fricka - Annelies Burmeister
Gerhilde - Danica Mastilovic
Ortlinde - Helga Dernesch
Waltraute - Gertrud Hopf
Schwertleite - Sieglinde Wagner
Helmwige - Liane Synek
Siegfrune - Annelies Burmeister
Grimgerde - Elisabeth Schärtel
Roßweiße - Sona Cervená
Götterdämmerung
Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson

Mime - Erwin Wohlfahrt
 Wanderer - Theo Adam
 Brünnhilde - Birgit Nilsson
 Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
 Erda - Vera Soukupová
 Fafner - Kurt Böhme
 Waldvogel - Erika Köth

Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
 Hagen - Josef Greindl
 Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
 Gunther - Thomas Stewart
 Gutrune - Ludmilla Dvoráková
 Waltraute - Martha Mödl
 Woglinde - Dorothea Siebert
 Wellgunde - Helga Dernesch
 Floßhilde - Sieglinde Wagner
 First Norn - Marga Höffgen
 Second Norn - Annelies Burmeister
 Third Norn - Anja Silja

Böhm's *Ring* drawn from the 1966 and 1967 Bayreuth cycles, somewhat straddles the two live and studio categories in that the recording is "live composite", thus combining the advantages of the momentum of a live performance with the ability to patch minor flubs or select better versions of certain passages. If you are looking for one complete set, this latest re-mastering is such a bargain that there can be no argument: this is it.

Böhm's and Solti's casts have several superlative artists in common, starting with Birgit Nilsson's Brünnhilde, a role which she herself called her finest hour, towering above all other assumptions. She is partnered by a young James King as Siegmund and the ever-reliable Wolfgang Windgassen, even if he was never anyone's ideal Siegfried. The roster of great Wagnerians is bolstered by the incomparable Alberich of Gustav Neidlinger and four Big Beast Bases: Gerd Nienstedt (I tend to confuse him with Neidlinger for obvious typographical reasons) as a fine Donner and a lowering Hunding, Josef Greindl as Hagen, Martti Talvela as a massive Fasolt and Kurt Böhme as Fafner. As is so often the case with that great artist, Leonie Rysanek begins in husky voice and "lowing" too much, but becomes a radiant, gleaming Sieglinde as she warms up. Eminent singers such as Helga Dernesch (Wellgunde), Anja Silja (Freia and Third Norn) and Martha Mödl (Waltraute) pop up in a variety of smaller roles. With Böhm at the helm, what could go wrong?

You might have noticed that I have not yet mentioned the Wotan. For some, even the incipient wobble in Theo Adam's tone is off-putting, but he is on his best behaviour here and his vibrato is far less troublesome than I remembered it. True, his bass-baritone is somewhat lighter than the ideal, but the top is thrilling and he is very moving and expressive in his handling of the text. To be fair, Solti and Karajan are hardly problem-free in the Wotan department; an aging Hans Hotter is decidedly labouring by the time he came to record the role for Solti in *Die Walküre* in 1965, and Karajan's ill-advised miscasting of Fischer-Dieskau in *Das Rheingold* still brings tears to my eyes. Furthermore, Böhm's Wotan is consistent throughout the cycle, whereas both Solti and Karajan use two different singers – although I find both George London and Thomas Stewart superior to Adam in terms of vocal splendour.

Böhm's pacing throughout is urgent and driven; some deem him unduly rushed but this suits many for whom this tetralogy is prone to longueurs and he is clearly galvanised by the circumstances of live performance. Audience noise is minimal and the re-engineering has removed most of the hiss without compromising the upper frequencies.

The re-mastering is triumphant and I see ridiculously cheap copies of this set available on Amazon Marketplace. Decca included this *Ring* in their 33 CD "Great Operas from the Bayreuth Festival" box set which of course offers only the complete "Bayreuth Ten" operas performed at that festival. From a production point of view, that was a slapdash affair: no libretto (although that can be downloaded

easily enough), paper sleeves, minimal documentation, wrong timings and misdating of *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried* as 1971 instead of the correct 1966, but the sound was still superb.

Herbert von Karajan – 1966-70 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
 Fricka - Josephine Veasey
 Loge - Gerhard Stolze
 Mime - Erwin Wohlfahrt
 Alberich - Zoltán Kéléman
 Freia - Simone Mangelsdorff
 Froh - Donald Grobe
 Donner - Robert Kerns
 Erda - Oralia Domínguez
 Fasolt - Martti Talvela
 Fafner - Karl Ridderbusch
 Woglinde - Helen Donath
 Wellgunde - Edda Moser
 Floßhilde - Anna Reynolds

Siegfried

Siegfried - Jess Thomas
 Mime - Gerhard Stolze
 Wanderer - Thomas Stewart
 Brünnhilde - Helga Dernesch
 Alberich - Zoltán Kéléman
 Erda - Oralia Domínguez
 Fafner - Karl Ridderbusch
 Waldvogel - Catherine Gayer

Die Walküre

Siegmund - Jon Vickers
 Sieglinde - Gundula Janowitz
 Hunding - Martti Talvela
 Brünnhilde - Régine Crespin
 Wotan - Thomas Stewart
 Fricka - Josephine Veasey
 Gerhilde - Liselotte Rebmann
 Ortlinde - Carlotta Ordassy
 Waltraute - Ingrid Steger
 Schwertleite - Lilo Brockhaus
 Helmwige - Danica Mastilovic
 Siegrune - Barbro Ericson
 Grimgerde - Cvetka Ahlin
 Roßweiße - Helga Jenckel

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Helga Dernesch
 Siegfried - Helge Brilioth
 Hagen - Karl Ridderbusch
 Alberich - Zoltán Kéléman
 Gunther - Thomas Stewart
 Gutrune - Gundula Janowitz
 Waltraute - Christa Ludwig
 Woglinde - Liselotte Rebmann
 Wellgunde - Edda Moser
 Floßhilde - Anna Reynolds
 First Norn - Lili Chookasian
 Second Norn - Christa Ludwig
 Third Norn - Catarina Ligenzda

Das Rheingold

Other reviewers have hit the nail on the head so I won't belabour the point: this otherwise highly recommendable recording is ruined by the folly (on Karajan's part) and hubris (D-F-D, who never recognised his limitations) in the casting of a light, grainy, Germanic baritone as the mighty Wotan; it results in a travesty of the role.

What a pity: I have come around to loving all three of the other Karajan recordings in this tetralogy, especially now that they have been so effectively re-mastered for the Originals series, and have reviewed them accordingly. The passing of time, too, has encouraged us to view the in a far more favourable light now that we are virtually bereft of singers of Wagnerian voices of this calibre. You will hear no greater giants than Talvela and Ridderbusch, and under-rated artists like Veasey and Dominguez now seem like vocal Titans - which is just as well, given that those are just what they are meant to be impersonating: gods and goddesses about to fall. Zoltán Kéléman is a wonderful Alberich, second only to Solti's Neidlinger and we have a fine trio of Rhinemaidens.

It is true, however, that D-F-D is not the sole weakness, however: Stolze's cackling, whining Loge is very much an acquired taste (I have done so) and several secondary roles are rather feebly or palely cast (Donner, Froh and Freia are all easily surpassed by Solti's team, for example) but they are serviceable.

Karajan of course conducts the (then) world's greatest orchestra beautifully, but this is the one unit of his *Ring* that you may safely discount even if you buy all the other three - and I urge you to do so. The same problem applies to Solti's *Ring*: his *Die Walküre* is flawed by the rocky, ageing Hotter and a Zwillingsspaar less accomplished than, say, Vickers and Janowitz. Leinsdorf's spectacular recording fills that gap or you can get the super-bargain Böhm *Ring* if you want value and consistency (just as long as you like earlier Theo Adam; his voice later becomes intolerable).

Meanwhile this one is overall something of a regrettable dud.

Die Walküre:

Time has been kind to this recording - indeed to Karajan's *Ring* in general. Once I have got over the inadvisability of Fischer-Dieskau's Wotan, it is mostly a winner all the way, through to the splendid, if slightly undercast, *Götterdämmerung*. I recently upgraded my estimation of the Siegfried and found myself wondering what anyone ever found to complain about and the same applies to this *Walküre*. If I whisked you in my time machine back to the mid-60's from these days of Wagnerian dearth to hear arguably the best opera conductor of the 20C directing the world's greatest orchestra starring some of the most stellar voices ever to sing Wagner, I think you'd get my point. I can't but this recording is as close as we are going to get.

Whether Tristan or Siegmund was Jon Vickers' greatest assumption is debatable but he is simply phenomenal here: powerful, sensitive, subtle, thrilling, moving - he is the absolute Siegmund here. He is accompanied by the splendid Gundula Janowitz, no doubt marginally assisted by the DG sound engineers, but let's have no disparaging nonsense about her being "a Mozart singer" (as if that were a disqualification) unwillingly thrust into a role several sizes too big for her. For goodness' sake, the woman sang Elsa, Elisabeth, Eva and Guttrune in Wagner, Elisabetta in Verdi's *Don Carlo*, Leonora in *Fidelio* and the big Strauss heroines, all to acclaim; if she were some tweety-voiced parvenue she could hardly have done that - a blip at the Met notwithstanding (the place is a barn, anyway). Talvela is a force of nature as Hunding, massive and menacing like contemporaries Frick, Ridderbusch, Langdon, Hotter, Ward, Nienstedt et al; where is their like today?

Thomas Stewart is a not especially subtle but tireless, noble-voiced Wotan; the last scene is simply glorious, with the BPO in full cry. His mate is the still under-rated Josephine Veasy who might not have quite Ludwig's intensity but certainly does the part justice. Crespin is not my favourite Brünnhilde but this is her finest hour, the slight edge in her voice irrelevant as she has the heft and stamina and acts convincingly. In many ways this studio recording is more homogeneous and satisfying than Solti's from the year before, which has always struck me as the weakest link in Solti's *Ring* with its ageing, audibly labouring Hotter, Crespin less appropriately cast as Sieglinde and James King, for all his merits, yielding to Vickers in terms of both voice and interpretation.

My preferred *Walküre* remains the superb, 1961 Leinsdorf studio recording with a young Vickers, Birgit Nilsson and George London but this Karajan recording runs it close, lacking only the last visceral thrill at climactic moments, Karajan tending to emphasise the more lyrical elements.

Siegfried:

A recent online conversation here about the relative merits of *Ring* cycles caused me to revisit, at the prompting of one interlocutor, this *Siegfried*, which I have always consigned to the lower ranks - and

now I wonder why. Everywhere I look, I find quite scathing reviews of this third instalment of Karajan's tetralogy as obviously the weakest of the four recordings. Most acknowledge the beauty of Karajan's conducting and the playing of the BPO but at the expense of the vivid drama Solti conjures up in his cycle; indeed, there are times when I could do with just a little more urgency but I am conditioned by long exposure to Solti and Leinsdorf, whose manner is much more urgent, and I must concede the glorious sweep of Karajan's vision. As you might expect, passages such as the "Forest Murmurs" are exquisitely shaded and the Prelude to Act III acutely conveys Wotan's psychological turmoil. However, the Forging Scene lacks somewhat of Solti's momentum and excitement.

Supposedly the weak link centres on his casting, with honourable exceptions made of Zoltán Kelemen's almost too beautifully sung Alberich and Oralia Dominguez's commanding, otherworldly Erda. He is a very good second to Solti's Neidlinger and she is unrivalled in her smallish role. Stolze repeats the manic, cackling Mime he gave Solti and I like it; it is highly entertaining even if he does yield too often to what is virtually Sprechstimme. Ridderbusch's mellow and sonorous bass depicts a graver, gentler, more thoughtful Fafner-Dragon sufficiently penitent in his death-throes to make us forget that he was a vicious fratricide - as if he might be saying, "The Ring made me do it"! True, Catherine Gayer's weedy, tremulous Woodbird is disappointment in comparison to Joan Sutherland's ecstatic trilling for Solti; how strange that Karajan should have undercast that tiny but important role.

Which brings us to the three main roles and the root of most objections. Thomas Stewart as the Wanderer is certainly more to my taste than the miscast and under-powered Fischer-Dieskau in *Das Rheingold*; he has a big, virile, youthful voice which, while it lacks the world-weary gravitas and insight of Hans Hotter, also lacks the hollow woof and wobble and I simply enjoy his secure, intelligent vocalism. Jess Thomas has been the main butt of opprobrium, which surprised me even before I listened to this recording as I have always known him as a good Wagner and Strauss singer, of high musical intelligence, considerable security of line and unfailing beauty of tone.

Yet Alan Blyth, in "Opera on Record" damns him as "anything but heroic", one review in the discography of the online Wagner Review calls him "completely out of his depth" and various reviewers on Amazon have condemned him as "outsung by Mime" - which is frankly absurd. This is certainly a younger, more boyish Siegfried, less oafish than some and certainly more ingratiating of timbre than Windgassen's often rather elderly sounding hero and his declamatory "Nothung" passages are certainly more than adequate, culminating in a splendid "So schneidet Siegfrieds Schwert!" His singing is touching and sensitive when he discovers Brünnhilde.

OK; the big test is that last half hour when the newly enamoured aunt and nephew sing exaltingly of their passion for each other. Karajan did not have Nilsson but he did have Helga Dernesch in her dramatic soprano stage. Both Dernesch and Thomas clearly find their roles a stretch - but who doesn't? Her distinctive timbre and shining top - I hear no "shriek", rather a "gleam" - carry her through the part, although her top B's and concluding C could be fuller; if you like her Isolde you will like her here. Karajan is considerate of his singers and they get away with it, if not with the fearless élan of, say, Remedios and Hunter, or Melchior and Traubel or Flagstad, but they are impassioned and tender in their exchange, greatly helped by Karajan's restraint.

So I find myself re-assessing this set, very much in its favour. Possibly the passage of time, the dearth of Wagner voices and encroaching senility have influenced this upward assessment but I do find myself deriving a great deal more pleasure from it than I expected.

Götterdämmerung:

Having re-visited all four recordings of Karajan's *Ring*, some of which I hadn't heard since I owned them on LP in the Middle Ages, I have discovered that it is by and large very much better than received

critical opinion would have it. The only casualty has been my continued antipathy to Fischer-Dieskau's fussy, under-powered Wotan in *Das Rheingold*; otherwise I am delighted with the singing, conducting and orchestral playing, all enhanced by the re-mastering.

Certain weaknesses persist but they are only relative. Dernesch is shrill and over-parted in the upper stretches (and I use the word advisedly) of her role but is also womanly, impassioned, very human and the possessor of a warm, vibrant soprano that we would be glad to hear today. Brilioth is no slouch as Siegfried and the replacement for Jess Thomas, whose contribution to *Siegfried* I have also greatly revised upward. He lacks penetration but is steady and attractive of tone, rather more lyrical than some and none the worse for that. Ludwig is a tower of strength, doubling as a grave Norn and an anguished, desperate, melancholy Waltraute. I love Gundula Janowitz's silvery, faintly tremulous, very vulnerable Guttrune and of course Zoltan Kelemen's cameo as Alberich is a gem - but the real triumph is the gorgeously sung Hagen of Karl Ridderbusch. It can be argued that his sound is intrinsically too noble but he turns that to his advantage, using his smooth, purring bass and formidable upper extension to turn Hagen into a sinister, scheming Iago rather than an overtly malevolent, brutish bully of the Frick school. His sleepy half-voice when his father visits him in his slumber is both mesmerising and a vocal tour de force. In voice type, he is the forerunner of Kurt Moll, who similarly has trouble playing villains because he invariably sounds more like a benign Sarastro. The same accusation of being vocally unsuited to Gunther could be levelled Thomas Stewart's similarly heroic bass-baritone but he sings superbly and makes a really rounded character of that craven chieftain.

It is true that Karajan's conducting does not generate the visceral thrill of Solti's version - the latter's desire to crank up tension as opposed to bringing out the sheer lyricism of Wagner's score is obvious - but Karajan's insistence upon but the sheer beauty of the BPO's sound is a marvel in itself and there are compensations when the subtleties of the music score are given their due - although I am not suggesting that Karajan cannot create real impact, as Siegfried's funeral music is overwhelmingly grand.

I have read one or two absurdly negative critiques of this profoundly intelligent recording but agree with reviewers who maintain that there is surely room in the world - or at least in any Wagnerian's collection - for two such different yet equally compelling accounts as those by Solti and Karajan here. I listen to both with almost equal pleasure but would ultimately plump for Solti as first choice simply because Nilsson, Frick and the conductor create such excitement in key scenes such as that when Brünnhilde, Hagen and Gunther - with D-F-D much better cast there - swear vengeance upon Siegfried in the scintillating trio that closes Act 2. Yet that same scene still comes off well under Karajan and I don't want to exaggerate any supposed lack of intensity in his recording.

Hans Swarowsky – 1968 (studio; stereo) Weltbild Classics; Calig; Profil; Azzurra
Orchestra - Großes Symphonieorchester

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Rolf Polke
Fricka - Ruth Hesse
Loge - Fritz Uhl
Mime - Herold Kraus
Alberich - Rolf Kühne
Freia - Heidemaria Ferch
Froh - Herbert Doussant
Donner - Rudolf Knoll
Erda - Ursula Böse
Fasolt - Otto von Rohr

Die Walküre

Siegmond - Gerald McKee
Sieglinde - Ditha Sommer
Hunding - Otto von Rohr
Brünnhilde - Nadézda Kniplová
Wotan - Rolf Polke
Fricka - Ruth Hesse
Gerhilde - Heidemaria Ferch
Ortlinde - Liselotte Becker-Egner
Waltraute - Angelika Berger
Schwertleite - Hilde Roser

Fafner - Takao Okamura
 Woglinde - Liselotte Becker-Egner
 Wellgunde - Angelika Berger
 Floßhilde - Hilde Roser

Siegfried

Siegfried - Gerald McKee
 Mime - Herold Kraus
 Wanderer - Rolf Polke
 Brünnhilde - Nadézda Kniplová
 Alberich - Rolf Kühne
 Erda - Ursula Böse
 Fafner - Takao Okamura
 Waldvogel - Bella Jasper

Helmwige - Bella Jasper
 Siegrune - Ingrid Goeritz
 Grimgerde - Margit Kobeck(-Peters)
 Roßweiße - Erika Schubert

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Nadézda Kniplová
 Siegfried - Gerald McKee
 Hagen - Otto von Rohr
 Alberich - Rolf Kühne
 Gunther - Rudolf Knoll
 Guttrune - Ditha Sommer
 Waltraute - Ruth Hesse
 Woglinde - Bella Jasper
 Wellgunde - Liselotte Becker-Egner
 Floßhilde - Erika Schubert
 First Norn - Ingrid Goeritz
 Second Norn - Margit Kobeck(-Peters)
 Third Norn - Siw Ericsson

The individual box-sets of this *Ring* are becoming harder to find, but the cycle as a whole is still available very cheaply; you could do a great deal worse than invest in it to hear this music done justice by a relatively unknown but highly proficient cast. This might not be a first choice when considered alongside starrer, prestige recordings and it is true that if you want a budget *Ring* there are now other options, especially Böhm's, but I maintain that this makes a fine introduction for any Wagner tyro and a great supplement for the seasoned collector. It is wholly convincing and represents extraordinary value.

Das Rheingold:

This super-budget *Ring* was not especially highly regarded at the time of its appearance in the late 60's, especially in the wake of Solti's blockbuster set, but with the passage of time we must surely show greater appreciation for such secure, vividly articulated singing as we hear in this first instalment.

The clean, bright, sound is the product of the placement of just two microphones and there are some nice effects which mimic Decca's, such as the reverberation surrounding Alberich's voice when he commands and terrifies the Nibelungen hoard - and the Alberich here is second only to Neidlinger for the intensity of his singing. None of the singers is a household name or star, although some were regulars on the Wagner circuit and made some valuable recordings; all are native German speakers except for the distinguished Japanese bass Takao Okamura who also sang Verdi bass parts very well. His black Fafner is matched by Otto von Rohr's old school Fasolt. The vibrancy of the Rhinedaughters' singing instantly make the listener sit up and the Wotan is excellent if hardly charismatic or thrilling in the way that the greatest bass-baritones can be. The secondary roles are taken with distinction; there are three first rate tenors as Froh, Mime and Loge - the latter being Fritz Uhl, best known for his *Tristan* eight years earlier with Nilsson under Solti; here he lightens his voice and deliberately assumes a more whining tone as he had already long been singing Heldentenor roles. The Donner makes his mark in his hammer-strike passage towards the end. Ursula Boese is not ideally sepulchral as Erda but still impressive. The Fricka is Ruth Hesse, who went on to have a distinguished career. Only the Freia is a little shrill but not damagingly so. All in all, this is a cast which we would kill to hear today, given the dearth of true Wagnerian voices.

The scratch orchestra, made up of Prague bands and local German orchestras, is very fine and if Swarowsky's conducting is somewhat literal and straightforward - some big moments pass rather prosaically - nor is he irritatingly interventionist and much of the time one is simply listening to Wagner as he is meant to go.

This can be picked up for ridiculously little and makes a satisfying first introduction to a masterwork.

Die Walküre:

This is recorded in more than acceptable, occasionally slightly wiry, stereo sound, as you may hear from the superb double basses and timpani in the Prelude. Swarowsky goes on to conduct the love music with swelling passion although later some of the narratives need more pace and bite to avoid becoming longueurs. However, the crucial climaxes to Acts 1 and 3 are handled very well, even if in the latter there is some roughness in the otherwise powerful singing of the Wotan, Rolf Polke. He can strain and even yell on his top G flats, yet he is an excellent vocal actor, really makes something of the Act 3 narration which can drag, and his Farewell is very touching and expressive; "So kusst er die Gottheit von dir" is simply magical in its tenderness. Gerald McKee puts in a great few days' work as Siegmund. His legato could be smoother but he has considerable heft and power at his disposal; the sustained cries of "Wälse" are thrilling. His delivery of text can border on the mechanical and stentorian but he finds more expressiveness when caring for his twin in their flight. His Brünnhilde makes a terrific impact on her first entry with her "Hojo-to-hos", cleverly exploiting the break between her registers to yodel magnificently. She can become a tad unsteady but is generally very impressive. She is backed by a first-rate team of Valkyries. The Fricka, Ruth Hesse has a big, hooty, powerful mezzo and makes strong impression as the wronged and indignant goddess. Otto von Rohr lives up to his name with his large, purring bass, his lowering, glowering presence oozing menace. Ditha Sommer is considerably more rewarding here as Sieglinde than she is as Gutrune later in the cycle; her soprano can be both fruity and shrill - its registration is not ideally developed - but she is firm and involved, rather in the Rysanek school of portrayal.

Siegfried:

First of all, I must contradict a previous reviewer who states that "there are no world class voices here"; I guarantee that if any of the three lead singers were available to sing in modern Wagnerian productions, they would be fighting off offers for years to come. Furthermore, we may hear a first-class Mime with top notes to rival his Siegfried - in fact both tenors hit notes head on without sliding - and the ability to whine and moan without being irritating, an Alberich second only to Neidlinger despite a bit of swooping, an excellent Woodbird and a superb Fafner in the great Japanese bass Takao Okamura. It is true that Gerald McKee is audibly stretched in the Forging Scene but he gets there, is touchingly tender and boyish in the Forest Murmurs and exhibits remarkable reliability and security in the fiendishly taxing eponymous role. Kniplova has a big, grainy sound which verges on the unwieldy, especially when her vibrato starts to obtrude, but she also has a really solid lower register and a top with that laser penetration essential to a really good Brünnhilde. The Wanderer is the highly competent and experienced Rolf Polke, who sometimes skimps top notes but is generally resonant, tonally centred and very impressive. He might not rival the very best Wotans; he lacks London's heft and Hotter's subtlety with the text, but we are talking about comparisons with the very greatest artist ever to assume that role; this remains a noble assumption.

There has been talk of this being a scratch orchestra assembled haphazardly just for this very rushed recording project but it is really much better than that, being an amalgam of some of the best Czech and German musicians available, and recording the whole *Ring* all of a piece plus *Lohengrin* too over a mere four weeks lent a kind of live immediacy and tension to proceedings. Hans Swarowsky keeps things moving but manages some telling effects, such as the very atmospheric opening, and he finds both poetry and detail in the more lyrical sections of the score, such as in the aforementioned "Forest

Murmurs" where McKee acquits himself so well, and the Transformation scene between the smashing of Wotan's spear and Siegfried's discovery of the firewall. Indeed, again despite some acerbic observations from a couple reviewers who I suspect hear what they want to hear from what was so obviously always a budget recording, I hear little wrong with Swarowsky's direction and the climax to this opera really delivers.

The simple two-mike placement gives more than adequate stereo sound.

Götterdämmerung:

Always a bargain edition, this is currently available for very little either individually as per here on Weltbild Classics or as a set on the Profil label, both well remastered. It completes an eminently satisfying and distinctly under-rated cycle recorded in haste as something of a scratch recording over a few days in 1968 under the vastly experienced mentor-teacher-conductor Hans Swarowsky. That it is cast in strength is immediately apparent, even if the artists are no longer well known today. I don't think either principal recorded much else but they were established Wagner singers on the circuit, with big, slightly blowsy voices and they acquit themselves magnificently. There is a slight whine in Gerald McKee's Heldenenor, some occasional approximation of notes and rhythms and a few slips in his German but he is the real thing and manages all the difficult passages, including the top C on "Hoiho". I'm not surprised that he sounds a bit tired in the scene where he swears upon Hagen's spear point and yells a bit, but generally he is very satisfactory and would be a star today.

Nadezda Kniplova is really very impressive at times, sometimes sounding like Nilsson in the middle of her voice though occasionally letting a rather plaintive tone obtrude. Like her Siegfried, she has all the notes and is at her best for the climax of the opera. I find her German clear, well enunciated and serviceable. Her vibrato can become too prominent which makes her sound a bit matronly but there is power and stamina aplenty. She, too, delivers on her top C on "Heil" in the opening love duet. It's a pleasure to listen to two such hefty voices rather than the pale substitutes fielded too often these days.

The rest of the cast, with the exception of Ditha Sommer's wobbly, strident Guttrune, is superb. We start with three very strong-voiced Norns and later hear three delightful Rhinedaughters. The Gunther - also a fine Donner in *Das Rheingold* - is almost too virile and nobly voiced for such a craven coward and often sounds rather too like Otto von Rohr, a black, baleful Hagen - a properly menacing basso profundo - but they are terrific with Kniplova in the crucial vengeance oath scene. The Alberich, as in *Das Rheingold* is second only to Neidlinger for biting scorn and rage and the scene where he appears to Hagen in his dream is superb in its atmosphere and word-painting.

I like Swarowsky's non-interventionist conducting; he never lingers and while listening I simply forgot to note any "interpretation" as it all proceeded so naturally. Either he or the recording brings out some pleasing detail like the piccolo's top line in the Rhine Journey. The orchestra is wonderful, especially the brass; sample the Prelude to Act II to hear their quality. It is matched by the spiritedness of the Vienna State Opera chorus who could not be lustier in the Act II "Hoi-hos" scene.

Herbert von Karajan – Salzburg 1973-1978 (film soundtrack/live; stereo) Opera-Depot
Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Das Rheingold

Wotan - Thomas Stewart
Fricka - Brigitte Fassbaender
Loge - Peter Schreier
Mime - Gerhard Stolze

Die Walküre

Sigmund - Jon Vickers
Sieglinde - Gundula Janowitz
Hunding - Martti Talvela
Brünnhilde - Régine Crespin

Alberich - Zoltán Kéléman
 Freia - Jeannine Altmeyer
 Froh - Hermin Esser
 Donner - Lief Roar
 Erda - Birgit Finnilä
 Fasolt - Karl Ridderbusch
 Fafner - Louis Hendrikk

Siegfried

Siegfried - Jess Thomas
 Mime - Gerhard Stolze
 Wanderer - Thomas Stewart
 Brünnhilde - Helga Dernesch
 Alberich - Zoltán Kéléman
 Erda - Oralia Domínguez
 Fafner - Karl Ridderbusch
 Waldvogel - Reri Grist

Wotan - Thomas Stewart
 Fricka - Christa Ludwig
 Gerhilde - Liselotte Rebmann
 Ortlinde - Carlotta Ordassy
 Waltraute - Ingrid Steger
 Schwertleite - Lilo Brockhaus
 Helmwige - Gerda Scheyrer
 Siegrune - Barbro Ericson
 Grimgerde - Cvetka Ahlin
 Roßweiße - Helga Jenckel

Götterdämmerung

Brünnhilde - Helga Dernesch
 Siegfried - Jess Thomas
 Hagen - Karl Ridderbusch
 Alberich - Zoltán Kéléman
 Gunther - Thomas Stewart
 Gutrune - Gundula Janowitz
 Waltraute - Christa Ludwig
 Woglinde - Liselotte Rebmann
 Wellgunde - Edda Moser
 Floßhilde - Anna Reynolds
 First Norn - Lili Chookasian
 Second Norn - Christa Ludwig
 Third Norn - Catarina Ligenzda

This is not strictly speaking a *Ring* cycle being assembled from live recordings over five years but the Salzburg venue and the presence of Karjan and several singers such taking the same roles throughout confer a certain unity upon it. The singing is wonderful but the sound is in no way comparable to the studio recordings and as such cannot be anything other than a supplementary purchase for the enthusiast, not a first recommendation

Günter Neuhold – 1995 (live; digital) Brilliant; Membran
 Orchestra - Badische Staatskapelle

Das Rheingold

Wotan - John Wegner
 Fricka - Wilja Ernst-Mosuraitis
 Loge - Hans-Jörg Weinschenk
 Mime - Michael Nowak
 Alberich - Oleg Bryjak
 Freia - Ruth Floeren
 Froh - Mario Muraro
 Donner - Tero Hannula
 Erda - Mette Ejsing
 Fasolt - Simon Yang
 Fafner - Malcolm Smith
 Woglinde - Doris Brüggemann
 Wellgunde - Ruxandra Voda
 Floßhilde - Wilja Ernst-Mosuraitis
Siegfried
 Siegfried - Edward Cook

Die Walküre

Siegmond - Edward Cook
 Sieglinde - Gabriele Maria Ronge
 Hunding - Frode Olsen
 Brünnhilde - Carla Pohl
 Wotan - John Wegner
 Fricka - Zlatomira Nikolova
 Gerhilde - Claudia Egler
 Ortlinde - Ruth Floeren
 Waltraute - Zlatomira Nikolova
 Schwertleite - Cornelia Wulkopf
 Helmwige - Margaret Chalker
 Siegrune - Clara O'Brien
 Grimgerde - Katarzyna Kempa
 Roßweiße - Wilja Ernst-Mosuraitis
Götterdämmerung
 Brünnhilde - Carla Pohl

Mime - Hans-Jörg Weinschenk
 Wanderer - John Wegner
 Brünnhilde - Carla Pohl
 Alberich - Oleg Bryjak
 Erda - Ortrun Wenkel
 Fafner - Simon Yang
 Waldvogel - Tiny Peters

Siegfried - Edward Cook
 Hagen - Markku Tervo
 Alberich - Oleg Bryjak
 Gunther - Bodo Brinkmann
 Gutrune - Gabriele Maria Ronge
 Waltraute - Zlatomira Nikolova
 Woglinde - Doris Brüggemann
 Wellgunde - Ruxandra Voda
 Floßhilde - Wilja Ernst-Mosuraitis
 First Norn - Ortrun Wenkel
 Second Norn - Zlatomira Nikolova
 Third Norn - Gabriele Maria Ronge

It is over sixteen years since fellow MusicWeb International contributor [Christopher Fifield wrote an approving review](#) of this super-bargain *Ring*, so it is perhaps not too soon to revisit it in the light of issues since, especially as it is still available absurdly cheaply on the Membran, Documents and Brilliant labels, licensed from Bella Musica. As such, it serves as a highly recommendable introduction to the tetralogy for the novice, or indeed as a supplementary recording for the incurable *Ring* collector like me. It is perhaps most comparable to another budget *Ring* conducted by Hans Swarowsky much earlier in the 60's, still available cheaply individually on Weltbild Classics or as a set on Profil, and has similar virtues and disadvantages, in that no-one could reasonably expect star voices of the kind featured in more celebrated cycles, yet both are faithful to the spirit of the work and provide a genuine experience of its thrills. Furthermore, both conductors preside over swift, propulsive, no-nonsense accounts of the scores and the orchestra's competence is never in doubt.

Listening to this digital recording of live performances made me newly conscious of how habituated I had become to the many classic live performances from the 50's graced by great artists but nonetheless in muddy, or brittle, mono sound; the benefit of these recordings from the 90's is the amount of vocal and instrumental detail discernible. For instance, Flosshilde's lower, mezzo-soprano line in the Rhinedaughters' trios is so often obscure but gratefully audible here and the better balance between orchestra and singers provides a much clearer and more complete sound picture, permitting the listener to recreate the drama vividly in the mind's eye. There is very little audience noise.

A further similarity between this set and Swarowsky's is the presence of singers who rival more famous names in key roles, especially Alberich, Wotan and the Giants. Beginning with *Das Rheingold*, Oleg Bryjak here and Rolf Kühne for Swarowsky both rival Gustav Neidlinger's Alberich for Solti for black, incisive malice. John Wegner has a firm, focused bass-baritone; it is a tireless, hard-edged voice able to surmount the formidable challenges of the role of Wotan, and the Giants are neatly contrasted, with Simon Yang offering an attractive, sympathetic Fasolt against veteran American bass Malcolm Smith's gruffer, more saturnine and threatening Fafner. The Rhinedaughters are fine, homogeneous team and Wilja Ernst-Mosuraitis makes a firm, impassioned Fricka. The Freia is adequate, if a tad wobbly but Mette Ejsing's Erda is wonderfully steady and gnomic. Loge is very musically sung by an aptly oily, light-voiced tenor who also handles the text well. The only real blot on the first instalment of the tetralogy is the mercifully brief but painful contributions of the Froh; fortunately, Donner's hammer-blow incantation is much more satisfactory, with Tero Hannula singing heroically and the moment of impact suitably impressive, even if nobody will ever top John Culshaw's recreation for Decca.

I agree with Christopher Fifield that the opening scene of *Die Walküre* is the best in the whole Ring and crucial to the listener's pleasure - and here it certainly passes muster. There is plenty of tension and dynamism in the opening pursuit music - the timpani are especially present; Edward Cook has an

attractive, genuine Heldentenor reminiscent of James King without quite his heft, Gabriele Maria Ronge makes a strong, warm, feminine Sieglinde, as good as any I've heard anywhere. The orchestra plays their love music with real passion and feeling. Frode Olsen has almost too elegant and noble a tone for the brutal Hunding but is an imposing presence. The climax to the scene clearly stretches Cook; he has to pause and take a vocal running jump at the top A in his concluding phrase, but he gets there, while Ronge sails through her impassioned outburst – and her “Rysanek scream” when Siegmund pulls Nothung out of the Ash-tree is electrifying.

Zlatomira Nikolova is a dramatically alert, vocally secure Fricka, despite a little shrillness. The Valkyries are a fine brood. Wegner is not the most expressive of Wotans when it comes to delivering text, but he certainly comes alive in the scene where he tracks down and punishes Brünnhilde. She is the commendable South African dramatic soprano Carla Pohl, whose powerful voice is a bit “short” when it comes to her top notes; she sometimes has to stretch and occasionally just misses the mark, but is otherwise commanding, and makes her case to Wotan movingly in their long scene before her incarceration on the rock. Wegner's “Leb wohl” and “Loge, hör!” are splendidly vocalised and the Magic Fire music dances winningly – conductors too often take that music too slowly for my taste. The work concludes in a blaze of golden sound, as it should.

For *Siegfried*, we have a new tenor, Wolfgang Neumann in the leading eponymous role and Hans-Jörg Weinschenk moves from Loge to become Mime, ensuring that we get a more restrained, musical account in the same manner as Julius Patzak for Furtwängler in Rome rather than the usual cackling psychopath. I was also pleased to see bass Simon Yang move from (by then deceased) Fasolt to Fafner, as he has a lovely voice. Sadly, there is no such advantage in the exchange of Edward Cook for Neumann, who has a dreadful, bleating wobble and an ugly tone, and whose performance is for me the weakest point of the whole cycle. It's a relief when Wenger's Wanderer heaves into view – or rather, earshot - for his riddling session with Mime. Neumann yells his way gamely through the Forging Scene and when he should be singing quietly he resorts to a kind of whining, droning Sprechstimme which is really irritating. Siegfried has so much music that he has to have an attractive voice if we are going to avoid boredom. For that reason, I enjoy Alberto Remedios, Jess Thomas, Bernd Aldenhoff, Set Svanholm and, to a lesser extent, Wolfgang Windgassen but, to quote a famous critical maxim from the “Gramophone” magazine, “It is time to complain when Mime outsings Siegfried”.

The Woodbird is adequate without being very ethereal but the best singing in the best singing on CD 3 comes from Fafner and in the opening of Act 3, from the exchange between the Wanderer and Ortrun Wenkel's grave, steady Erda, although her top notes are a bit screaming. The orchestra plays beautifully in Brünnhilde's Awakening Scene and Carla Pohl copes admirably, singing with warm, full tone and only occasionally pushing too hard but Neumann does not improve. At least he is consistent and stays the course in that horribly demanding music but compared with the finest recordings, the race to the finish is breathless.

There is no pretending that any of the singers has the “money notes” to give *Götterdämmerung* the glamour it assumes when the greatest Wagnerian singers tackle it, but it is nonetheless a dramatically coherent, decently sung account. The Hagen is lumpy and lacks the black bass sound required, but is suitably vicious, the Gunther has an obtrusive vibrato and yells, and neither lead singer can hang on to climactic phrases, yet the work still makes its impact, by virtue of the intensity of the orchestral playing and the evident sincerity and commitment of all concerned. Edwards Cook might have had a tenor one size too small, yet I was pleased to have him back as Siegfried, for the beauty of his timbre and the musicality of his delivery. Good singers, like the Rhinedaughters, whom we have already heard in the preceding instalments of the cycle, reprise their roles or, like the splendid Gabriele Maria Ronge, previously Sieglinde, return in two new ones, Guttrune and Third Norn – and she is excellent in both. Siegfried's Funeral March is especially powerful; you would never guess that we are hearing a

supposedly "provincial" German orchestra; they are first rate. Pohl makes a fine job of the Immolation Scene; she is clear-voiced, womanly and tireless. I suggest that anyone debating whether to acquire this set – although there is no need to hesitate given its current asking price – sample the concluding scene to gain a fair idea of its strengths.

Documentation may be sparse, but track listings and an English synopsis are provided, and how many super-bargain sets of the *Ring* are accompanied by a complete German libretto – admittedly without the English translation - and Arthur Rackham's illustrations?

Recommendations

One Ring to rule them all? Well; maybe; that's a party game for Wagnerians – perhaps more of a mug's game without a winner. I can only make some tentative suggestions, beginning with the live, vintage cycles from the 50's conducted by Krauss and Keilberth, and both of Furtwängler's. All four are now available either in Pristine's Ambient Stereo or, in the case of the Keilberth *Ring*, in true stereo on Testament, and the Wagner devotee must have at least one. My own, marginal preference is for Furtwängler's RAI recording.

Then there are the studio cycles from the late 50's and 60's. Swarowsky and Neubold's can surely only be of supplementary interest and for all their splendours, both Solti's and Karajan's cycles are flawed; a compromise might be to turn to Böhm's live Bayreuth *Ring*, although neither Theo Adam's Wotan nor Windgassen's Siegfried will satisfy everyone but Nilsson gives us her best Brünnhilde.

In my introduction to this survey, I immediately dismissed four more recent, studio recordings from the 80's and 90's as vocally inadequate; others are free to dispute that as too harsh but I can speak only from my viewpoint and taste. I think the Met compilation "Frankenstein" *Ring* is essential to Wagnerians but include it only as *hors concours*. Otherwise, I give a first and second choice for each category below. I apologise that my ultimate first choice is so predictable. A learned friend recently emailed me his preferences for *Ring* cycles, and they exactly reflect my own: "Solti/Decca for beginners, Keilberth/ Testament for connoisseurs, with Krauss' 53 as the pick of the bunch."

Live mono: Furtwängler, RAI, 1953; Krauss, 1953 – both in Ambient Stereo on Pristine Audio

Live stereo: Böhm, 1966-67, Decca; Keilberth 1955, Testament

Studio stereo: Solti, 1958-65, Decca*; Herbert von Karajan, 1966-70, DG

Historical compilation: the Metropolitan *Ring*, Bodanzky/Leinsdorf 1936-40

*First choice

Ralph Moore